THE SECRET TOLL

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at http://www.gutenberg.org/license.

Title: The Secret Toll
Author: Paul And Mabel Thorne
Release Date: September 10, 2011 [EBook #37378]
Language: English
Character set encoding: UTF-8

*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SECRET TOLL ***

Produced by Darleen Dove, Mary Meehan, and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at http://www.pgdp.net.

This file was produced from images generously made available by The Internet Archive/American Libraries.

By PAUL AND MABEL THORNE
Authors of "The Sheridan Road Mystery"

NEW YORK DODD,
MEAD AND COMPANY
1922

COPYRIGHT, 1922
BY DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY, INC.

THE PLIMPTON PRESS, NORWOOD, MASS
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I—THE TOLL IS EXACTED

CHAPTER II—"FRIENDS OF THE POOR"

CHAPTER III—ENGINEERING-CRIMINOLOGY

CHAPTER IV—THE CAR IN THE FOG

CHAPTER V—THE HAUNTED TREE

CHAPTER VI—THE FLAMING HAND

CHAPTER VII—SPIRIT CLUES

CHAPTER VIII—THE GIRL ON THE HORSE

CHAPTER IX—LUCY

CHAPTER X—CROSSED THEORIES

CHAPTER XI—TELEPHONE CALLS

CHAPTER XII—SATURDAY

CHAPTER XIII—A PUZZLING WARNING

CHAPTER XIV—THE INTRUDERS

CHAPTER XV—THE MASK OF DEATH

CHAPTER XVI—THE FATAL DANCE

CHAPTER XVII—AT THE DOORSTEP

CHAPTER XVIII—TRIANGULATION

CHAPTER XIX—FACE TO FACE

CHAPTER XX—THE INVISIBLE DETECTIVE

THE SECRET TOLL

CHAPTER I—THE TOLL IS EXACTED

"I'm damned if I give up a cent! I'll die first!"

"You very likely will. Others have. To refuse these people is the first step toward suicide."

"But are the police so impotent that a gang like this one can operate unmolested right under their very noses?"

"The police are efficient in ordinary cases. These people, however, operate mysteriously. So far, the police have been helpless."

The two men who thus discussed a criminal clique which was extorting money from prominent and wealthy citizens were seated in an exclusive Michigan Avenue club. From their deeply upholstered leather chairs they looked out across the busy street, with its hundreds of automobiles and strolling pedestrians, to the green lawns and leafing trees of Grant Park, awakened into renewed life by the soft breezes and warm sunshine of early June.

To the first speaker, Robert Forrester, lately returned from army service in Europe, and familiar with the privations, struggles and horrors of the great war, it seemed ridiculous that a band of criminals could endanger life in the heart of this bustling, crowded, well-policed city. Yet the threat was in his hand, and his older and presumably wiser companion assured him that they could make good the threat.

Robert Forrester was a young man of thirty—tall, dark and broad shouldered; his face deeply tanned by long army service. As a member of an old and wealthy family, of which he was the sole male survivor and head, Forrester might have followed the path selected by many of his boyhood chums and spent his life in the pursuit of pleasure or more or less indifferent occupations. He had chosen, however, to become a civil engineer; was graduated with honors, and had taken

active part in the completion of several big railroad projects before the great war.

When the United States entered the war he at once enlisted and went to France as an army engineer. He had been home now for several months and was planning to resume work in his profession at the first opportunity. The financial and business condition of the country did not favor large construction work at this time, so he was still lingering in Chicago, spending much of his time at the club, where he could keep in close touch with some of the far-sighted and influential men who planned and made possible the big undertakings which would give him the opportunity he sought.

His companion and confidant of the moment, Frederick Prentice, was past middle age. The possessor of large, inherited wealth, he was totally unlike the younger and more energetic man. He had never entered business, and the only times he ever condescended to visit a business office were occasioned by infrequent plunges into speculation through a broker friend, or the necessity of calling on his lawyer.

In his easy-going, well-financed existence he had had few problems or worries. To Prentice the easiest way out was the logical course.

Forrester knew this as well as any man, and was therefore little inclined to heed the well-meant advice which Prentice was giving him—to yield without a murmur to the outrageous and exorbitant demand that had been made upon him.

The young man opened the clenched hand in which he had crushed the warning message when making his vehement declaration. He smoothed out the offending paper on his knee and glared at it—reading again the words that enraged him more each time he studied them. The message was crudely hand-printed on a square of ordinary wrapping paper such as can be found in any store. At the top was the rough drawing of a human skull. Forrester read the words aloud.

> In Jasper lane two hundred feet west of Sheridan Road
> you will see a great oak tree on the left side. Before midnight
> Saturday place$10,000 in the opening you will find in this tree.
> Failure to comply means death. Be warned!
> Friends of the Poor

"On the other side," declared Forrester, "we lived and tramped and fought with spies and informers at our elbows. Enemy agents, ready to turn a dastardly trick at any moment, were on every hand. Though conditions were just ripe for them,

sooner or later we spotted them—practically every one. Do you mean to tell me that here, in a peaceful, law-abiding city, with trained police and intelligent detectives, we can't run down a blackmailing crew like this one?"

"That is exactly what has happened," said Prentice.

"And you want me to believe that every one of the victims has given up without a fight; that no real effort has been made to apprehend these desperadoes?"

"My, no!" exclaimed Prentice. "Several of the men threatened went to the police. The police put their best men on the case for weeks, but so far as I know, they never discovered a worth while clue."

"What happened to those men who resisted?" inquired Forrester.

"They either finally acceded to the demands, or were found dead. That is why I warned you to pay and say nothing. Remember, Bob, you have been away for a long period, while I have stayed on right here in the city a greater part of the time. I know exactly what has transpired in this matter; I speak from *actual experience*."

"Experience?" questioned Forrester, noting something significant in the stress which Prentice laid on his last words.

"Young man," said Prentice, shaking a finger at Forrester, "you may have had wider experience with some angles to life than I have had. On the other hand, I possess the calmer judgment that comes with advancing years. And I know more about *this* situation than you do. I advise you to draw ten thousand dollars from that ample bank account of yours, put it in that tree before midnight Saturday, and consider yourself lucky to get off so easily."

"I'll not do it!" declared Forrester.

Prentice extended his hand. "Let me see that paper, Bob," he requested. The paper was handed over and Prentice studied it carefully.

"Yes," commented Prentice, slowly, as he handed back the message. "It is unquestionably from the same people. That is a duplicate of the warning which I received."

"Did you get one, too?" exclaimed Forrester.

"A year ago—just about this time," divulged Prentice. "In fact, so far as I know, I was the first man upon whom the demand was made. When I went to the police about it, they claimed that it was the first time anything of the kind had come to their attention."

"Tell me about it, Prentice," urged Forrester.

"I will," agreed Prentice. "After you have heard *my* experience, you will realize more fully why I have told you to pay and say nothing.

"As I said before, it was just about this time last year that a duplicate of that notice was fastened to my front door with a knife. A maid found it when she went to bring in the morning paper, and presented it to me at the breakfast table. I had much the same feeling that you have regarding it; although I did not take it quite so seriously. As a matter of fact, I regarded it as a joke, until a few days later a second warning came in the mail.

"I had, of course, destroyed the first warning, but the second I took to the police, and laid the matter before them. They arranged with me to try to trap these people. The night that my time expired I took a dummy package and placed it in that tree. The police kept watch in the woods all night without seeing or hearing anyone. In the morning, they found the package still in the tree, but attached to it was a note stating that these people were not to be fooled, and allowing me three days in which to pay or take the consequences.

"For two weeks after that the police watched the tree, and a detective accompanied me whereever I went. There was no attack upon me, and the police assured me that it was undoubtedly the practical joke of some friend. They withdrew my detective guard and I thought the matter had ended.

"A few days later, however, as I was returning home along the North Shore in my car one night, a figure leaped upon each running board. They wore long black hoods with nothing save their eyes visible through openings cut in the hoods. These men pointed revolvers at me and ordered me to stop. They said that they represented the 'Friends of the Poor,' and told me that the time had come to pay the penalty for not complying with their demands. You can imagine my state of mind. I saw that the matter was really serious, and not a practical joke after all. I told them that I had thought it a joke and pleaded with them. They finally allowed me to go upon my promising to place the money in the tree the following evening.

"After drawing the money from the bank, I informed the police about my adventure, and they arranged to watch the tree again that night. I placed the money in the tree, and although five detectives remained all night only a little distance away, they heard and saw nothing. *In the morning the money was gone!*

"During last summer several other wealthy men received demands for money. So far as I have knowledge of the matter, they either paid the money, or were later found dead. With the first fall of snow the activities of this band ceased. A detective, detailed to the case, told me he thought they had stopped operations because of the snow. When they approached the tree, he explained, they would naturally leave tracks in the snow, in that way giving some hint to the police. I was inclined to believe, on the other hand, that they had obtained

all the money they wished; or else had concluded that the police were aroused to such an extent that it would be dangerous to keep on. This notice to you, however, seems to indicate that the detective with the snow-theory was pretty nearly right. Probably this warning to you is the beginning of another war to be waged upon the wealthy men of the city this summer."

"Your story is certainly interesting, Prentice," said Forrester, "but something really ought to be done. If these men are allowed to prey upon wealth in this mysterious way, there is no limit to the harm which they may accomplish. Why, just think of it! Unmolested, they might become bolder and bolder, and by steadily levying this secret toll, practically ruin every wealthy man in Chicago."

"Well," returned Prentice, "probably sooner or later the police will get them. So far as I am concerned, however, I would pay over the money at any time rather than have another experience such as the one I described to you. If you want to hire detectives, Bob, or stir up the police as I did, do so, by all means, but in the meantime take my advice and pay the money."

At this moment an attendant approached, informing Forrester that he was wanted on the telephone. Excusing himself to Prentice, Forrester went to the telephone to find that his mother was calling him.

"Son," she said, "Mr. Nevins has met with a serious accident. Josephine and I are going over to see Mrs. Nevins. She has just telephoned, asking us to call and stay with her the rest of the day; so we shall not be home to dinner. I wanted you to know so you would not worry about us."

"All right, Mother," replied Forrester. "I'll phone the house later and if Charlie is going to be in this evening I'll run over and bring you home. Good-bye."

The Nevins family and his own had been close friends for years. This friendship was about to be turned into relationship through the recently announced engagement of Forrester's sister, Josephine, to Charles Nevins, the banker's son.

Forrester hung up the receiver and returned to the lounging room to rejoin Prentice. As he crossed the room he saw that Prentice was reading one of the sensational evening papers, for even from a distance Forrester could read the glaring headlines:

"FRIENDS OF THE POOR"
COMMIT NEW MURDER

Prentice held the paper out for Forrester to see when the young man joined him, with the remark, "Evidently you did not get the first warning of the season, Bob, as I thought. Here's a man who received a notice two weeks ago, and assumed the same attitude that you did this afternoon toward this mysterious band."

"Who was he?"

"George Nevins, the banker!"

"George Nevins!" repeated Forrester, aghast at the news.

"Yes, old George Nevins—the tightest man in Chicago. I'll wager *he* fought as hard as any one could, but see what happened!" Prentice paused a moment, then added, impressively, "Do *you* still want to fight?"

"Harder than ever now!" asserted Forrester.

This was bringing it very close to home. Forrester wanted to be alone to think it over, so he gave his telephone call as an excuse, and took leave of Prentice.

"'Failure to comply means death!'" quoted Prentice, warningly, as Forrester turned to go.

CHAPTER II—"FRIENDS OF THE POOR"

On leaving the club, Forrester strolled slowly and thoughtfully north along Michigan Avenue. The knowledge that old Mr. Nevins had met his death at the hands of the same people who now threatened him, impressed Forrester with the seriousness of the situation. Always a fighter, his army training had developed this side of his nature to a point where it was practically impossible for him to accede to an unjust demand without a struggle.

It was Tuesday. Forrester reflected that he had but four days in which to freely carry out any plan which he might decide upon. In view of Prentice's experience, and the startling death of Mr. Nevins, there was no question that after midnight Saturday every move Forrester made would be attended with danger.

Immersed in these thoughts, Forrester suddenly found himself in front of the public library building at Washington Street. It reminded him that the city detective bureau was on La Salle Street at about this point. In spite of the apparent non-success of the police, he decided that his first duty would be to report to them the demand just made upon him. A few minutes later Forrester entered the detective bureau and sent in his card to the Chief of Detectives. After being admitted to the Chief's office Forrester laid the message from the "Friends of the Poor" before the head of the detective bureau, with the remark:

"I'm next! What shall I do about it?"

"Mr. Forrester," said the Chief, after only a hasty glance at the notice, which showed his familiarity with the subject, "sorry as I am to say it, the Department has made little progress in this matter. We have a half-dozen detectives working on the case right now. Detective Sergeants Cahill and O'Connor have given it special study. They have been working among the West Side joints for some time, and today they reported to me that they think they have a line on some of these

men. Nothing definite, understand, but it is the first suggestion of a clue which we have had.

"The probabilities are that between now and Saturday you will not be bothered. After Saturday, however, if we have made no further progress, I suggest that you stay off the streets at night, and that during the day you select only the main thoroughfares for going about the city. If you have any friends in the North Shore suburbs, and you probably have, I recommend that you do not visit them for the present. If you wish it, I will put a police guard at your home."

"I don't want to be coddled," objected Forrester. "I'm an ex-service man and I think that I can take care of myself."

"You needn't be ashamed to take precautions in a case like this," explained the Chief. "This gang is both dangerous and clever. If Mr. Nevins, whose death has just been reported, had allowed me to give him a police guard, as I wished, he would probably be alive today. You are really helping the police when you allow us to give you a police guard, for if these fellows show themselves in any way, our man is there ready to act. If anything happens to you when no one is around, then we are simply confronted with another mystery and have much of our work to do over again."

"That's very logical reasoning, Chief," agreed Forrester, "and I thank you for the offer. But I would not have a moment's peace of mind with a detective or a policeman hanging around my heels. I am perfectly willing to take my chance. In fact, I did not come to you for protection, but simply to talk this matter over with you, and see if something definite cannot be done to eradicate these criminals. I am doubly interested, not only because I have received this notice, but from the fact that my sister is engaged to Mr. Nevins' son, thus practically bringing his death right into our family. It is the principle of the thing which I want to fight—and if there is anything I can do to help, outside of having a detective trailing me around, I want to do it."

"Well, of course," replied the Chief, "we cannot force a police guard upon you, but outside of that there is really nothing that you could do. It takes both experience and a special kind of ability to carry on detective work. To be perfectly frank with you, *novices only hamper us.* All I can say is, leave this notice with us and we will do what we can in the matter."

"No," returned Forrester, "I don't want to leave this notice. I want to keep it for my own use. My mind is fully made up to take an active part in this hunt myself. I should appreciate it if you will tell your men about me and explain that if they find me doing mysterious things in out-of-the-way places, not to mistake me for one of the criminals. If I find out anything, or have any suspicions, I will

let you know."

"All right," laughed the Chief. "Play around if you want to, but for the love of Mike, don't get under our feet." The Chief and Forrester exchanged friendly good-byes and the young man passed out into La Salle Street.

Forrester reflected that Prentice was right. While the detective chief had maintained an encouraging attitude, it was clear that this was merely to "save the face" of the Department so far as it was possible. Between the lines of the Chief's words Forrester had read the helpless and hopeless position in which the police were placed. It seemed like pure egoism for him to attempt to accomplish something in which experienced detectives had failed, yet Forrester felt that he should make some effort to solve the mystery behind this menace. After all, he reasoned, could the solution to this problem be so much more difficult than many of the engineering problems which he had attacked and mastered.

It now occurred to him that he had not thought to ask Prentice if any private detective agencies had ever been put on the case. So far as his present knowledge of the matter went the problem had been left entirely in the hands of the police, and yet he knew that in many instances private agencies had been successful where the police had failed. Forrester decided, therefore, that his next step would be to consult with one of these agencies. He went to a nearby cigar store and consulted the classified telephone directory. Under the heading of "Detectives" he found a long list of agencies and independent operatives. Several famous names stood out in this list, but Forrester fancied that these big agencies would merely put an ordinary operative on the case, while he felt that the matter needed the attention of a bigger man. Obviously, by going to a smaller agency, it would be easier to get the head of the agency to do the work. While these thoughts were passing through his mind, Forrester's eye caught a small advertisement in the center of the page.

GREEN'S NATIONAL DETECTIVE AGENCY

SECRET SERVICE OF ALL KINDS

Correspondents in All the Leading Cities of the World

Benjamin F. Green, *Principal*

Commercial Building, *Chicago*

Forrester decided to call on Mr. Green.

He found "Green's National Detective Agency" to consist of two small rooms. In the outer room he was met by a woman of uncertain age and colorless personality who immediately ushered him into Mr. Green's office. Green

was a large, strongly built man with thin black hair, carefully brushed over a bald spot, and a bristling black mustache. The detective was in his shirt sleeves, a half-burned, unlit cigar gripped in the corner of his mouth, and a well-polished badge gleaming on the left breast of his unbuttoned waistcoat.

"How-do," he said, rising to greet Forrester, and added, "Have a chair," pushing one in the direction of Forrester with his foot.

The two men sat down and after Green had shifted his cigar to the other side of his mouth, he inquired, "What can I do for you?"

"Ever hear of the 'Friends of the Poor'?" inquired Forrester, going straight to the point.

Green sat up in his chair with a jerk.

"*You* been gettin' one o' them notices?" he asked.

Forrester took out the warning message and laid it on Green's desk. The detective's eyes sparkled as he leaned over and closely examined it.

"Gee!" he exclaimed, at length. "I've just been dyin' to get onto this case. So *you're* one o' them rich guys they're after, eh?"

"I gather from what you say, Mr. Green, that you know something about the matter," said Forrester.

"*Do* I?" cried Green. "I'll show you how I've been followin' that thing up." He reached into a drawer of his desk, drew out a folder and opened it before him. Forrester saw that it contained newspaper clippings and various hand-written notes.

"I'll tell you, Mister," said Green, "I've been followin' this here case right from the start. I've got some theories, too, that I ain't been tellin' to nobody. I've just been itchin' to get busy on it, but you know us guys have to make a livin'—we can't work on a case for nothin'."

"Well," informed Forrester, "I'm going to give you a chance to see what you can do." Forrester was not wholly taken with Green's personality, but the man certainly seemed to know something about the case, and the fact that he already had theories was a hopeful sign. "There's the notice," continued Forrester, "which I received in the mail this morning. It gives me until Saturday at midnight to pay over the money or take the consequences. Now, I'd rather present you with the ten thousand dollars than give up to these people."

Green bounced in his chair.

"Do you *mean* that?" he gasped.

"Certainly," answered Forrester. "You bring these men to justice and the ten thousand is yours. In the meantime, I'll pay you your regular fees and expenses."

Green ran a finger around inside of his collar and stared at Forrester for a

minute or two. It was quite evident that he was thoroughly stunned at the offer which had just been made to him. Then, realizing that he was making a poor showing before an important client, he straightened up in his chair and assumed the dignified attitude which he thought in keeping with his profession and the handling of such a momentous case.

"I'm glad to see that you have such a complete record there," commented Forrester. "I'm anxious to get the full details and history of this affair."

Green laid his dead cigar on the edge of the desk and pulled his chair closer, clearing his throat as he did so.

"The case o' the 'Friends o' the Poor'," he announced, "first became known to the public about this time a year ago. Here we have the matter o' one Frederick Prentice." Green picked up the first clipping.

"Yes, I know all about that case," interrupted Forrester. "Prentice is an old friend of mine."

"Ah—h—h!" breathed Green, looking much impressed as he laid the clipping and a few others aside. "Maybe you knew *this* guy, too—Booth Warren, the banker?"

"Yes, I knew him very well," returned Forrester.

"Ah—h—h!" sighed Green, expressively. Never before had he floated into such an environment of millionaires.

"But," added Forrester, "I don't know the details of his case. In fact, I had not heard of his death."

Green cleared his throat once more.

"Booth Warren," he explained, referring to his notes and clippings, "was vice-president o' the La Salle National Bank. In July o' last year this criminal organization demanded twenty-five thousand dollars, which he refused to pay, placin' the matter in the hands o' the police." At this mention of the police Green gave Forrester a ponderous wink. Then he continued, "After ignorin' three notices, Warren was found by the roadside one mornin' just beyond Evanston. The police surgeon o' the Evanston Police Department could find no signs o' violence, or any evidence as to how the man had been killed. He said he would diagnoose the case as one o'—" Green paused a moment over the pronunciation of the word—"asphyxia."

Green thumbed over his clippings.

"Then followed three cases where the guys lost their nerve and paid up. I guess you're chiefly interested in the guys that got *killed*, though," added Green, turning to Forrester.

"Yes, I think so," answered Forrester. "I want to know just what happens to a man who turns these people down."

"Well, he gets *his*—that's all I can say," replied Green, emphatically. "That is," he added, realizing his slip, "unless he comes to me."

"Then it is to be expected that I shall escape?" said Forrester, smiling.

"I said I had some theories, Mister," returned Green, assuming a wise expression. "I ain't tellin' *all* I know, but you can bet your life I'll be on the job between now and midnight Saturday.

"The next case o' a death," Green resumed, taking up another clipping, "is that of James Ingraham, capitalist and director of the Cook County Trust Company. He was ordered to pay fifteen thousand dollars, and ignored the demand—except for reportin' it as usual to the police. Ingraham was found sittin' under a tree in Lincoln Park early one evenin', and the hospital they took him to, and where he died, reported that all the symptoms showed that he had been—asphyxiated.

"In the early fall, two more guys was threatened and decided to pay up.

"Now," concluded Green, closing the folder and leaning back in his chair, "I want you to notice two things strikin' me as funny. These here guys apparently knock off in the winter time. Another thing is that the poor devils that get took off is always—asphyxiated."

"But," protested Forrester, "how could they be asphyxiated when the bodies are always found out in the open air? I thought that a person must be shut up in a closed room to be asphyxiated."

"Ah-ha!" cried Green. "*Now* you've got the idea! These fellows have a headquarters somewhere. After they kill a guy they bring him out in an automobile and throw him alongside the road somewhere. The thing to be done now is to locate their headquarters. *That's* what little Benny is goin' to do!"

"How do you propose to find that out?" inquired Forrester.

"Watch the tree and follow 'em!" replied Green, decisively.

"That sounds all right," objected Forrester, "but the police have been watching that tree for months without getting sight or sound of anyone."

"Leave it to *me*," assured Green, with a wide sweep of his hand. "I know things these here city dicks never think about. Now, Mister—Mister—, by the way, you ain't told me your name yet."

Forrester handed his card to Green.

"Now, Mr. Forrester," continued Green, as he glanced at the card, "take my advice and don't let nobody bunco you into any strange place. And I wouldn't take no rides in strange automobiles, either. I'll let you hear from me in a couple o' days. In the meantime you can count on findin' me around that tree o' nights. I kinda got an idea that there tree's a mighty busy place these nights. The 'Friends

o' the Poor' seem to be makin' a big drive right now. I suppose you heard about the banker, Nevins, today?"

"Yes," said Forrester, rising to go. "I shall probably have full details of that shortly. My sister is engaged to Mr. Nevins' son."

"Ah-h-h!" sighed Green again, as his new client passed out of the door.

CHAPTER III—ENGINEERING-CRIMINOLOGY

Although the yearly hegira from town to suburb was well on, the Forresters had delayed their departure and were still residing in the town house on Bellevue Place. To a man of Forrester's active disposition Bellevue Place meant a comparatively easy walk from the downtown section. Moreover, in the present troubled condition of his mind, the exercise would be conducive to clearer thinking, so he started out with the intention of walking home. As he was crossing the Michigan Avenue bridge over the Chicago River, a motor car slowed up by the curb and Forrester heard someone call to him. Glancing around, he saw that it was Prentice.

"On your way home?" inquired Prentice.

Forrester answered in the affirmative.

"Then jump in with me," said Prentice.

"Thanks," returned Forrester, "but I had decided to walk home."

"Better change your mind," urged Prentice. "It's a fairly long walk, and I should like your company. Remember that after you leave me I have a long and lonesome drive."

"You are out on the North Shore now, are you?" queried Forrester, as he climbed into the car.

"Yes," answered Prentice. "We closed the town house on the first. I'm surprised that your folks are still in the city."

"We hope to leave soon. The decorators are still busy at our place. We gave 'Woodmere' a good overhauling this spring. I should think you would rather take

the train than have such a long drive when you are alone."

"I very seldom use the train," explained Prentice. "You know that time is of no great value to me, and I enjoy the motor ride. The cool lake air and the scent of the woods are really very refreshing after being in the hot city—and certainly preferable to the gas, smoke and cinders that are inseparable from the train.

"By the way," continued Prentice, after a pause, "have you done anything further about that message we were discussing today?"

"Yes," replied Forrester. "I have taken very definite action since I left you."

"Drawn the money from the bank, I suppose."

"I certainly did not!" declared Forrester. "I went first to the police, and then engaged a private detective agency to look into the matter."

"What did the police say?" inquired Prentice.

"Oh, I guess it was the same old stuff," admitted Forrester. "Although they did say that they believed they had a clue at last."

"Well, I hope it is a better clue than some of the others they have pretended to discover. It is certainly time they did something. And what is your private detective going to do?"

"Not very much, I'm afraid," said Forrester. "He proposes to keep his eye on this mysterious oak, which I believe is just what all the detectives have done so far without results."

"Exactly," agreed Prentice. "But it is the first time, I think, that anyone has employed a private detective. Perhaps he will be more successful than the police. Well, here you are," he added, as he swung the car to the curb and stopped.

"Thank you for the lift," said Forrester, as he stepped out. "I'll let you know how my private detective gets on."

"Yes, do," urged Prentice. "I should certainly like to get some revenge for the money those people took from me. I suppose I shall see you at the club as usual tomorrow."

"No," returned Forrester, "between now and Saturday I am going to be very busy on this 'Friends of the Poor' matter. I don't intend to let any grass grow under my feet in running them to earth." Then he added, laughing, "However, after Saturday I may have to hang around the club for protection."

"If I can be of any help, don't fail to call upon me," offered Prentice. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye!" called Forrester, as the car shot off up the drive.

Forrester was glad that his mother and sister were not at home. His mind was concentrated on the peculiar situation in which he now found himself, and he felt little inclination to talk. His mother certainly would have noticed his preoc-

cupation and guessed that something was wrong. It would have been difficult to keep up the pretense of having nothing on his mind. At this time he did not intend to tell his family anything about the warning he had received, for it would worry them unnecessarily, especially after the fate which had overtaken Mr. Nevins.

After dinner Forrester went to the library, hunted up his pipe and sat down to think. He had just settled back in his chair when he heard the door-bell, and a minute later a maid announced that a reporter from the *Times* wished to see him. Forrester hesitated as he ran the matter over in his mind. He disliked publicity and this call certainly meant publicity. On the other hand, he was seeking all the information and help which he could get, and it was a well-known fact that newspaper reporters frequently solved mysteries which baffled the police. Forrester decided, therefore, that he really had little to lose and perhaps much to gain by allowing the reporter to interview him, so he instructed the maid to send the man in.

The young man entered the library briskly, giving a quick and comprehensive glance around the room before addressing Forrester.

"Mr. Forrester?" he inquired.

"Yes," replied Forrester, affably. "Take this chair and make yourself at home."

As the young man sat down, Forrester turned back the lid of a humidor and pushed it along the library table.

"Gee!" said the young man, selecting a cigar. "You seem glad to see me. I don't always get a greeting like this."

"Well," explained Forrester, smiling, "I'm in deep trouble and you, as a newspaper man, may prove to be a friend in need."

The young man visibly expanded as he remarked, "That's right! We newspaper men can be a lot of help sometimes. If there is anything I can do, say the word. My name's Humphrey."

"I'm very glad to know you," said Forrester. "Now, may I inquire how you happened to call on me?"

"Sure thing," returned Humphrey. "You see, our police reporter informed us that you had been to the detective bureau today—that you had received one of those notices from the 'Friends of the Poor.' Owing to the death of a prominent man like Mr. Nevins, which is attributed to these people, our paper is going to run a special feature article tomorrow morning, reviewing the whole history of this affair. Naturally, we want to know all the details of each case, and what every one connected with it has to say. As you seem to be the latest victim, we are interested in the particulars of your case, and your personal views regarding it."

"I am afraid," declared Forrester, "that the details of one case correspond very

closely to those of any other case. I have merely received a warning to put ten thousand dollars in a certain tree by midnight Saturday or take the consequences."

"You're quite right," agreed Humphrey. "The method in each case is the same. But the outcome is not always the same. What do *you* propose doing in the matter?"

"Well, for one thing," asserted Forrester, "*I do not intend to pay*!"

"That's the stuff!" approved Humphrey. "If everyone would fight, we'd soon put those fellows out of business. But," he added, leaning confidentially toward Forrester, "*how* do you propose to fight them?"

"That," said Forrester, "is a question I have not entirely settled as yet. As you know, I went to the detective bureau this afternoon."

"Poof!" grunted Humphrey, leaning back and flicking the ashes from his cigar.

"And I have also engaged a private detective," added Forrester.

"Who?" queried Humphrey.

"A man named Green—Benjamin F. Green."

"There are detectives—and there are detectives," commented Humphrey. "Green falls in the first class."

"I think I get your meaning," smiled Forrester, "and I am inclined to agree with you. That, in fact, is the great problem which confronts me now—how to get a *good* detective at work on the case. Any suggestions, Mr. Humphrey?"

"I'm a better knocker than I am a suggester," explained Humphrey. "I can tell you the faults of detectives as easily as I could run over my A-B-Cs. I'll admit, though, that there *are* some good ones. Sooner or later one of them will get on this case and solve it. I wouldn't care to take the responsibility of recommending anyone."

"I know you came here for an interview, Mr. Humphrey," said Forrester, "and I realize how dangerous it is to tell all your plans to a man who is seeking news. But on the other hand, I have a very high opinion of the ability and cleverness of newspaper men. That is why I am going to take you into my confidence."

"I'm enjoying it," assured Humphrey, selecting and lighting another cigar.

"The fact is," announced Forrester, "I am thinking of becoming a detective in this matter myself. The question is, can I do it—have I the ability to be a detective?"

"Why not?" queried Humphrey.

"Well, what, in your opinion, makes a good detective?"

"Brains!" shot back Humphrey. "Look here, Mr. Forrester. As a reporter I can scent the biggest story ever scooped up by a Chicago newspaper. A rich man, in the face of dangerous threats, turning detective and running down a criminal

band which has defied the best efforts of the police department. All I ask is that you give me the dope first!"

"Then I may count on you to keep my plans quiet and give me a certain amount of assistance?" questioned Forrester.

"You bet!" exclaimed Humphrey. "To tell you the truth, you've actually got me going. I can see real possibilities to the idea. Now, look here, Mr Forrester; my paper assigned the 'Friends of the Poor' story to me the first time the matter came up. They have kept me at it since because I was familiar with the details. I don't pretend to have any detective instincts, but just my share of common sense, and I have thought the whole matter over pretty carefully. The police, of course, would laugh at any theories from me, but you, perhaps, might like to hear my ideas on the subject."

"Go ahead," urged Forrester.

"In my opinion," Humphrey explained, "the police have fallen down so far on this case because they are sticking too close to the rules. The average city detective becomes familiar with the ways of the average thug-type of criminal. Give him an ordinary murder, burglary, or blackmailing case and he knows just about where to go to get his hands on the people he wants. But when a different class of criminal begins to operate, the average detective cannot see the new conditions. He goes floundering along the same old lines and lets real clues slip through his fingers."

Humphrey paused to relight his cigar.

"Go on," again urged Forrester. "I am learning something."

"Now," continued Humphrey, "the crooks that compose the 'Friends of the Poor' have been operating for about one year. In that time they have received various sums running from ten thousand to twenty-five thousand dollars. I venture to say that in one year's time they have taken in pretty close to two hundred thousand dollars! Now, I ask you, Mr. Forrester; if you were taking in that amount of money, where would you have your hangout? In some West Side saloon or tenement, or in a high class neighborhood—perhaps even in some fine hotel? Do you get my thought, Mr. Forrester?"

"I think I do," said Forrester.

"All right, then," went on Humphrey. "I happen to know what the police are doing in this matter. They are dividing their time between watching an old oak up on the North Shore, and rummaging around West Side dives. Somewhere, *in between*, our men sit laughing at them!"

"I am strongly inclined to believe you are right, Mr. Humphrey," assented Forrester. "But the important question is: How are we going to locate that place which lies in between?"

"That's where you come in," maintained Humphrey. "That's where your money, social position, training and brains are going to enable you to give the ordinary detectives the go-by. When you mentioned becoming a detective, an idea hit me with an awful wallop. Now, Mr. Forrester, you're an engineer."

"How did you know that?" queried Forrester.

"We usually look up a man before we interview him. We know all about you."

"I see," smiled Forrester. "Well, then, as an engineer how am I going to solve this problem in crime?"

"By triangulation!" exclaimed Humphrey.

Forrester laughed. "Now you *have* got me guessing, Mr. Humphrey. As a civil engineer I have used triangulation in my surveying work on many occasions, but how I can apply it to a criminal problem is beyond me."

"Well," explained Humphrey, "the first thing to do in a criminal case is to take a good survey of the problem and the ground it covers—just as you do when you build a bridge, a dam, or open up a mine. The higher type of criminal investigator usually falls back upon his study and knowledge of criminology, which is a broader and more scientific development of the ordinary *facts* with which the city detective starts to work. What I am going to suggest to you is a new branch of criminology. For want of a better name at this time we'll call it Engineering-Criminology. I am not an engineer myself, and what I know about surveying and triangulation could be put into a thimble, but I think I know enough to give you an idea of what I mean.

"As I said before, the detectives are wallowing around in the mire of the lower West Side—they are in the valley, so to speak. Now, if you, as an engineer, were about to survey a certain unknown and inaccessible territory, you'd go up on the nearest high hill and pick out two other prominent points in the landscape, so as to form a triangle. Then you'd take sights, or whatever you would call it, from one point to another. A little figuring would give you the exact distance from one point to another, and a lot of information about the lay of the land in between. Am I not right?"

"You've put it very roughly, but I think I can see what you are driving at," returned Forrester.

"Continue the idea a little further, Mr. Forrester," went on Humphrey. "If you were making a mine survey you would first lay out your boundaries, tunnels and so on, on the surface, wouldn't you?"

Forrester nodded.

"Then you would carry those lines below the surface. In other words, the

lines you had laid out *on* the surface would be a guide to you when you got *below* it."

Again Forrester nodded.

"All right," said Humphrey. "I think you've got my idea about this case, and what I mean by solving it by triangulation. You will take the people, and the events which have occurred, and use them as your prominent landmarks; that is, points for your triangles. You will then study what lies between those landmarks, and also what lies under the surface. By that means I think you will eventually discover some clues that will be worth while.

"For example; take Mr. Nevins, who was the last victim of the 'Friends of the Poor,' as the first point of your triangle. Take his bank as the second, and his home as the third point. Instead of measuring the distance between these points by feet or rods, measure it by people and events. Set down, just as you would the figures of a survey, the names of his friends and acquaintances, the men with whom he has done business, and any little out-of-the-way events which have taken place in his life, so far as you can ascertain them. Do this with the other people who have been concerned in the blackmailing activities of this band. By arranging your triangles so they will overlap if possible, you will get at a starting point. *Somewhere the lines will cross*, and at the point of intersection a definite clue may form."

"Mr. Humphrey," laughed Forrester, "you are giving me a man's-size job."

"I know it!" admitted Humphrey. "But the man who solves this case has got to put more than ordinary brains and ability into it. You have got to forget the old rules and theories and formulas. That is why the experienced detectives are falling down. They can't forget the rules! When you suggested a while ago that you thought of turning detective, I immediately saw its possibilities. Your engineering training has taught you how to study cause and effect, and work out plans for meeting unusual conditions. You start with a mind trained to solve difficult problems, but at the same time your mind is free of all the traditions of the detective craft. Things they wouldn't notice, or consider important if they did, will impress themselves upon you and start a train of thought.

"Now then," exclaimed Humphrey, jumping to his feet, "I have over-stayed my welcome and I must get back to the office and write up my story for tomorrow's paper. You can rest assured, however, that the important details of this conversation will not get into print until you say the word. But remember, when the big scoop comes—*it belongs to me!*"

"I promise you that," returned Forrester, rising and extending his hand. "We'll shake hands on it."

"And you may count on me to help all I can in the meantime," declared Humphrey, as he grasped Forrester's hand.

"Let me offer you a suggestion for that article which is to appear tomorrow," said Forrester.

"Shoot!" replied Humphrey.

"Announce that I have given up all idea of fighting the 'Friends of the Poor,' and say that Saturday, before midnight, I shall place a package containing the money in that tree."

"I get you," smiled Humphrey. "I'll be there!"

CHAPTER IV—THE CAR IN THE FOG

Forrester glanced at his watch. It was just nine o'clock, not too late to make his promised call on the Nevins.

The Nevins' residence was on Dearborn Parkway, only a fifteen-minute walk for Forrester, so he sauntered west after leaving the house. A heavy mist was gathering on Lake Michigan and rolling through the streets before a gentle breeze from the east, completely shutting from view all but the nearest street lights and any pedestrians who might be abroad at this hour. Always a quiet neighborhood, the mist-hidden streets now seemed somber and deserted, and so still were his surroundings that Forrester's attention was presently attracted to the soft chug-chug of a motor somewhere in the fog behind him.

When the sound first caught his ear it had made little impression, but as the purring of the engine continued, apparently always at the same distance, it struck him as peculiar that the car did not catch up with and pass him. The threat which now hung over his head, as well as his recent interviews with detectives and the reporter from the *Times*, had made Forrester more alert than usual. He was keenly on the watch for anything that might appear out of the ordinary in character. Although he continued at the same pace without looking back, Forrester listened attentively to the sound of the motor and noted instantly that as he turned north on Dearborn Parkway, the motor followed him. He was convinced that he was under surveillance, and as detectives were not likely to keep guard over him from a motor car, it was clear that the persons who followed him had some other motive.

Forrester was well aware that auto bandits were active at all times in the city streets, and it was more than likely that a foggy night would prove especially inviting. Still, he could not recollect ever having heard of a hold-up of this character in his immediate neighborhood. As he deliberated on the matter, the

suspicion grew stronger that the car which now followed him through the fog was connected in some way with the "Friends of the Poor." If that were so, there seemed little risk in allowing them to follow him, for it was certain that the ten thousand dollars they had demanded was of more importance to them at this time than his life, and as they had given him until midnight Saturday to pay the money, it did not appear likely that they would harm him before that time.

On the other hand, he realized that he had been especially active that day in taking steps to thwart them. It was not improbable that an organized band of this kind would have underground methods of gaining information and therefore might be familiar with everything he had done. Forrester recollected with a start that he had taken Humphrey for granted. Might it not be possible that Humphrey had merely been a spy sent to ascertain his attitude? As he recalled the young man's discourse it seemed strangely fanciful and might have been planned merely to add to his perplexities in seeking a solution. He had been extremely frank with Humphrey, and the supposed reporter would have a very comprehensive tale to unfold to his associates. Informed that Forrester planned to go further in his fight against them than any previous victim they had selected, was it not possible that they had decided to disregard his money, which might be easily replaced by a demand upon someone else, and make away with him before he had an opportunity to disrupt their plans? Forrester admitted to himself that he felt decidedly nervous and quickened his pace. He glanced back once or twice and saw the blurred but unmistakable outlines of a motor car without lights. Although the speed of the car had been slightly increased when he hastened his steps, the distance between them was maintained, and Forrester's mind grew easier as he became convinced that the sole purpose of the car behind him was to watch his movements. Very probably, he reflected, the "Friends of the Poor" kept track of their victims so that they could not escape by leaving the city or concealing themselves in some out-of-the-way place. Though he was probably safe for the moment, Forrester realized more fully now the dangerous nature of the task he had set himself.

By the time Forrester reached the Nevins home and rang the door-bell, the lesson had had its effect. He had acquired part of the attributes of a good detective—caution, and a suspicion of everybody and everything. In the future, so he assured himself, he would be more guarded in his conversation, not only with new acquaintances, but with his friends as well. At this moment a servant opened the door and Forrester stepped into the brilliantly lighted hallway with a feeling of relief.

As he was well known in this home he went immediately to the library without being announced. There he found his mother and sister with the Nevins

family. Evidences of grief were apparent on all their faces and after a general exchange of subdued greetings, young Nevins led Forrester to a sofa in a corner and said, "I suppose you've heard about Father, Bob?"

"Yes," replied Forrester, "and I'm mighty sorry, old man. It must have been a great blow."

"It was a dreadful shock to Mother. You know when a person is ill, and death is momentarily expected, you are sort of prepared for the final end, but when you find your father dead on the front steps, and you know that he has been murdered, it is an awful stroke."

"If you don't mind talking about it, Charlie, I should like to hear some of the details."

"I don't mind, Bob. The fact is, that is about all we have been able to talk about. There is very little to tell, however.

"It seems that Father received a notice about two weeks ago from this damnable blackmailing society which calls itself the 'Friends of the Poor.' About that notice, and what happened subsequently, we know practically nothing outside of the few details we read in the newspapers, and a little that the police were willing to tell us. Father never said a word to either Mother or myself about it. I believe he did not even tell his business associates, simply putting the matter into the hands of the police and going on about his business as usual. The Chief of Detectives called in person this morning, and during his visit, told me that he had offered Father a police guard, but that Father refused it.

"Last night Father attended a dinner of the *Midland Bankers' Association*, and as we naturally did not expect him home until quite a late hour, Mother and I retired at our usual time. The first we knew, therefore, that Father had not been home all night, was when we missed him at breakfast. When a maid went up to call him she found his bedroom door open and saw that the bed had not been occupied. I was just about to call up the police when the patrolman on our street rang the door-bell and asked the maid who answered the door if she knew the man who was lying on our steps. Of course, she immediately recognized Father, and when we heard her scream we all hurried to the door. The patrolman helped me carry him in. This man waited until the doctor came, as he said he would have to make a report and he wanted to know if foul play were suspected.

"Our doctor lives just across the street. He was here in five minutes, but there was nothing that he could do. He said that Father had unquestionably been dead for many hours."

"Could he tell the cause of death?" inquired Forrester.

"Yes," returned Nevins, "he stated that it was clearly a case of asphyxia. Fa-

ther, of course, had been murdered by the same method as all the other victims of the 'Friends of the Poor.'"

"But," protested Forrester, "how could they get at your father? It was my impression that he always went about in his car with a chauffeur driving."

"That is quite right," answered Nevins, "but Fate was with these people last night. They had evidently been watching for just such an opportunity. When our chauffeur drove the car up at nine o'clock this morning, which was his custom, to take Father down to the bank, I called him in and questioned him about last night.

"He said he had called for Father at eleven o'clock, as he had been instructed to do, and they started for home. Just as they reached Oak Street something went wrong with the motor. The chauffeur spent a half-hour trying to discover the trouble and he says that Father grew very impatient. Father, it seems, tried to get a taxicab, but all the cabs that passed were going north and had people in them. You know it is not much of a walk from Oak Street up to the house, and the chauffeur said that Father finally told him to take his time in fixing the car and he would walk home. The chauffeur saw him start off up the Lake Shore Drive and that was the last anyone saw or heard of Father until he was found on our steps this morning."

Forrester's thoughts reverted to the car which had followed him through the fog. There was little doubt in his mind that this same car had followed the elder Nevins, waiting for the opportunity to strike. Forrester did not question that the banker's murderers were in that car now. At this very moment they might be waiting outside for Forrester to reappear. It flashed through his mind what a simple matter it would be for him to notify the police and have them ready when he started out.

"Mother," said Forrester, "how soon do you expect to go home?"

"I suppose we could leave at any time now, Son," replied Mrs. Forrester.

"How did you plan to go home? I did not see the car outside when I came in."

"No," explained Mrs. Forrester, "it was such a pleasant evening that I told William he need not return. After the excitement and worry we have been through I thought it would be good for us to walk home."

"It is not at all nice out now," said Forrester. "A heavy fog has come up. I think I would better call a taxicab."

Forrester went to the telephone and ordered a taxicab. Then he whispered to Nevins, "May I use a phone upstairs where I can talk without being overheard?"

"Yes," informed Nevins, "you will find a phone in Father's room."

Forrester went upstairs and called police headquarters. He briefly explained

who he was, what had occurred on his walk over, and suggested that they watch for the strange car as he returned home.

"Leave the house in exactly fifteen minutes," instructed the man at headquarters, "and we'll be ready for you."

After returning to the library Forrester took an occasional surreptitious look at his watch and was pleased to hear the taxi driver ring the door-bell just as the fifteen minutes expired.

As Forrester assisted his mother down the steps he glanced hastily around. The fog was still heavy. He could make out nothing save the taxicab at the curb, but just as he was giving the address to the taxi driver he noticed a small man of slight build appear out of the fog. This man stopped quite near to him and lit a cigarette. Aside from noting the man's build and the fact that he wore a cap and had very dark hair, Forrester could make out no other details, for the man stood with his back to Forrester and the lighted match really served only to throw him out in silhouette. Forrester entered the cab and it started off. As he leaned back he reflected that the man he had seen was of too small a stature to be a detective. His act of stopping so close to them might have been mere accident, but to Forrester the thing had a significance which could not be overlooked. He was confident that this was one of the men they wanted. He hoped that the police, although not visible in the fog, had arrived as promised. If so, he felt that their problems were pretty close to a final solution.

They reached Bellevue Place without incident. The whir of the taxicab's engine had effectually drowned any sound of pursuit and though he had glanced back several times, Forrester had been able to see nothing save a wall of fog back of the cab. Yet somewhere in that fog-draped street he was sure the murderers' car was lurking.

There appeared to be no one around as they left the cab, but Forrester, after his mother and sister had gone into the house, lingered for a moment in the dark doorway. He could hear the hum of the taxicab's engine as it passed down the street toward the Lake Shore Drive. Otherwise the night was silent.

Suddenly Forrester heard the roar of opened mufflers in the other direction, and the next instant two black shapes passed swiftly by through the fog. Red flashes leaped out of the darkness and sharp reports resounded through the street as they passed the door.

"The police are on the job!" exulted Forrester.

He hastily stepped inside and closed the door, for his army experience had shown him the danger of stray bullets.

CHAPTER V—THE HAUNTED TREE

Twice before he retired that night Forrester sought information from the police. By one o'clock, however, when no report had been turned in, he decided to wait until morning.

Early Wednesday morning he called the detective bureau on the telephone to find out what the police had accomplished. The voice at the other end of the wire was apologetic.

"We're sorry, Mr. Forrester, but the men got away from us. Had it been any other kind of a night we would have had them, sure. The fog prevented the detectives from seeing the car distinctly, so that after it turned into the Lake Shore Drive, and mingled with other cars, it was impossible to pick it up again.

"Our men were sure that their bullets struck the car. After giving up the chase they spent half the night on the West Side trying to locate an automobile with bullet holes, but were unsuccessful."

"Then you have made no progress at all on the case," said Forrester.

"No, I wouldn't say that," was the reply. "We now have some fairly definite people to look for. Before the incident of last night the whole thing was a mystery that did not present a single tangible point on which to base our investigations. Now, we believe that these people are just an ordinary auto bandit gang, and we know how to take steps to look them up."

"If anything of a hopeful nature occurs," requested Forrester, "I will appreciate it if you will call me on the telephone and let me know about it."

"We will be glad to do that," agreed the man at headquarters. "You may expect to hear from us at any time. And in the meanwhile, we will also appreciate any further tips similar to the one you gave us last night."

Forrester then called the garage and ordered his roadster sent around to the

house.

Although the police seemed to be trying, and were under the impression that they were making some progress, Forrester decided to make a few efforts on his own account as he had originally planned. Even if he did not get very far in his investigations, he at least might discover something that would be of assistance to the police. He had little faith in Green, yet he realized that with this private detective, the police, and himself all working along individual lines, it was possible that the sum of all their discoveries might convey some hint of the lines that must be followed to bring the criminals to justice.

Forrester was not much impressed with Humphrey's triangulation theory. It was too far fetched and fanciful. Moreover, he realized that before putting even this surveying method into actual practice, he must first look over all the ground carefully. At the present moment, the only prominent and definite landmark in the case was the oak tree. He knew that this had already been the starting point for all the detectives who had been conducting investigations, but it was possible that because of his freedom from traditions, as Humphrey had put it, he might discover something which the more experienced detectives had overlooked. As soon as his roadster arrived, therefore, he planned to visit the oak tree in Jasper lane.

This analyzing of Humphrey's suggestions recalled to Forrester his suspicions of the night before. He decided, before going further, to make sure of Humphrey, so he got the *Times* office on the wire and inquired for the reporter. He recognized the young man's voice immediately and it lifted a considerable load from his mind.

"This is Forrester," he told Humphrey. "I called up to see if you had any new information for me."

"Oh, hello!" called Humphrey. "No, I haven't any new tips—but say—did you see my article this morning?"

"No," admitted Forrester, "I haven't had time to look at the paper."

"Don't miss it!" cried Humphrey. "I'll bet I've killed any idea those fellows might have had that you would put up a fight."

"What did you say?" queried Forrester.

"Why, I described how I called on you last night, and stated that I found you in a blue funk. Without actually saying so, I intimated that the cold sweat was standing out in beads on your forehead and thrills of fear running up and down your spine."

"I'm afraid," laughed Forrester, "that you have given my friends an idea that I hid in a dugout all through the war."

"Not on your life!" protested Humphrey. "You just read that article. You'll find that I'm an artist when it comes to descriptive writing."

"All right," agreed Forrester, "I'll read it tonight. I'm starting out now to have a look at that oak tree."

"Good luck!" said Humphrey. "Let me know if you spot anything. I've got to break away now. The Chief's shouting. Good-bye!"

The most direct route to follow in starting out for the North Shore would have been to go straight up the Lake Shore Drive and Sheridan Road. Forrester, however, had become cautious since his experience of the night before. He turned his car west and followed less used thoroughfares as far as Devon Avenue, glancing back from time to time. The few cars which he saw at these times all turned off at various streets before he reached Devon Avenue. Forrester, confident that he was not followed, swung east on Devon Avenue and soon turned into the north bound traffic on Sheridan Road.

Twice before reaching Jasper lane he stopped his car at the side of the road and pretended to adjust his engine. What he really did, however, was to carefully inspect the cars which passed him so that if he met any of them again they would be easily recognized. But when he turned into Jasper lane it was quite evident that no one had followed or paid any attention to him.

The surrounding country appeared lonely and deserted at the point where Jasper lane branched off from Sheridan Road. In this locality there were only large estates and vacant tracts of land, all heavily wooded. Jasper lane, which sloped slightly upward as it left Sheridan Road, was an unfrequented byway sometimes used as a short cut to a few large estates that lay along a prominent road farther to the west.

Forrester figured that two hundred feet would bring him to the crest of the rise before him and he kept his eyes on the left side of the road as he drove slowly along. He did not need any special guide to locate the oak tree, however, for its gigantic form towered above all the other trees in the neighborhood. He turned his car to the opposite side of the road, stopped his engine, and inspected the tree. The trunk, which was fully six feet in diameter, rose to a height of about fifteen feet, at which point it branched into two parts. Forrester's engineering mind took in this detail at once and it occurred to him that the space thus formed would make a roomy and comfortable perch from which to keep a watch over anything that might take place at the tree. He surmised that the detectives who had previously watched the tree had merely concealed themselves in the surrounding undergrowth where clever people, familiar with the locality, might have been able to espy and avoid them in approaching the tree. If at any time he decided

to do a little watching on his own account, Forrester concluded that this was the point of vantage which he would occupy.

Forrester now jumped down from his car and strode across the road to take a closer view of the tree and its surroundings. The tree stood back from the road a few feet, and an open grass-covered space surrounded it for a distance of about ten feet. Beyond this clear space were thick undergrowth and young saplings, and a little farther back the woods began. From the road to the tree was a well-defined pathway. As Forrester approached the tree he found that this pathway wound around it and led off toward the right through the thick woods.

The opening referred to in the demand he had received was noticeable at once—a hole about a foot high by six or eight inches across. It had probably been caused by some fungus growth or insects eating into the tree and gradually rotting away part of the wood. The opening was about four feet from the ground and Forrester had to stoop slightly to put his arm into it. The space inside was comparatively small. Forrester was under the impression that oak trees were seldom, if ever, affected in this way, but as he felt around, digging his fingers into the rotting wood, there seemed no reason to believe that the opening was other than a natural one. While his arm was still inside the tree, Forrester was startled to hear a voice close behind him, for he had not heard anyone approach.

"What yo'all doin' dere?"

Forrester withdrew his hand and turned swiftly to find himself facing a coal black negro. Though Forrester was himself a tall man he found that he had to slightly raise his eyes to look into those of the man before him. They looked each other over for a moment and then the negro repeated his question.

"What yo'all doin'?"

"I don't know that that's any of your business," said Forrester.

"Dat's all right, Boss. Ah don't mean no offense. Dat tree done have a bad name, an' us folks aroun' yere has begun to kinda keep our eyes open."

"Well," inquired Forrester, "what do you think I'm doing at the tree?"

"Ah dunno, Boss. Dat's what Ah'm tryin' to fine out."

There was a slight pause as the two men again looked each other over. To Forrester, the negro, in spite of his size, appeared to be really a harmless individual. Possibly he was a gardener in the vicinity. The negro on his part could see that Forrester was a gentleman, and therefore hardly likely to be one of the supposed blackmailing gang who had made this tree famous for miles around. His changed attitude was clearly apparent in the manner in which he next addressed Forrester.

"Yo' mus' scuse me, suh, fo' buttin' in on yo' disaway, but mah Missey done

tole me to watch eberybody dat hung aroun' dis yere tree. Ah only been doin' mah duty, suh."

Forrester accepted this apology in the spirit in which it was tendered, and assumed a more tolerant attitude toward the negro.

"You live around here, do you?" he inquired.

"Yas, suh. Jes' a little way up de road on de oder side."

"Gardener, I suppose," suggested Forrester.

"Yas, suh. Dat an' some mo.' Mah wife, Marthy, an' me done be caretakahs fo' ole Mistah Bradbury. His house is jes' up de road aways. Him an' his wife done be liben in Califo'ny, suh."

"Well, arn't you and your wife afraid to live alone out in the woods, with bad men all around?" asked Forrester, with mock gravity.

"Yas, suh. We done be mighty afeared sometimes. But we ain't alone no mo'."

"I thought you said your folks were in California?"

"Yas, suh, Ah done say dat. But we done got a young lady liben dere now, Boss. She ain't been dere long, suh—only since las' Sato'day. She's a mighty fine young lady, Boss, an' Ah's skeered dis yere tree am goin' to dribe her away. She done seem jes' fas'nated wif dis tree—hangin' aroun' all de time, Boss."

"Well!" murmured Forrester, thoughtfully. It was strange that a young woman should take such an interest in this tree, associated as it was with mystery, menace and the blood of victims. "You'd better look out for her," he added. "Some of these bad men may get her."

"Say, Boss, what yo' mean bad men?"

Forrester looked his surprise.

"Why," he explained, "the bad men who make people put money in this tree and then come and get it out."

"Dat ain't no men, Boss!"

"No men!" repeated Forrester.

"No, Boss. Jes' hants!"

"What nonsense are you talking now?" queried Forrester.

"Dat ain't no nonsense, suh. Dere ain't nobody aroun' yere, 'ceptin' maybe dat bad niggah woman dat libes back in dem woods, dat would go neah dis tree in de night time."

This was growing interesting, decided Forrester. He could not remember having heard Prentice, the detectives, or anyone, refer to these uncanny surroundings. Possibly they had heard of them, but had scoffed at the idea. Perhaps, then, that had been one of the reasons why so little progress had been made. Forrester

meant to get at the bottom of all this talk.

"What is your name?" he inquired.

"Joshua, suh."

"That's a good Bible name," commented Forrester. "I fancy a man with a name like that ought to tell the truth."

"Ah does, Boss; hones' Ah does," protested Joshua. "Ah belibes in de Lawd an' goes to church reg'lar. But de Lawd, he can't always stop de debil puttin' hants in t'ings."

"You really think this tree is haunted, do you, Joshua?"

"Hones', Boss. Dat's de whole truf an' nuffin but de truf."

"Tell me what makes you think the tree is haunted," requested Forrester.

"Done make me hab de shibers ebery time Ah talk 'bout dat, Boss. Yo' see, dere's a bad Jamaica niggah woman libes back in dem woods. She an' her husband done come yere 'bout two yahs ago. Dis yere tree all right den, but she done murdah her husban' one night."

"If she murdered her husband," said Forrester, "how is it she is living here now? Why wasn't she hung or put in jail?"

"De trouble was, Boss, dere wasn't no ebidence!"

"Then how do you know she murdered her husband?"

"Jes' a minute, Boss, jes' a minute! Yo' done got me all frustrated. Yo' done axe so many questions—an' axe dem so fas.'"

"All right, Joshua," laughed Forrester. "You tell the story your own way."

"As Ah was sayin', Boss, she done murdah her husban.' Nobody done see her do it, an' de polisman dat wen' huntin' roun' nebber foun' nuthin'. She said her husban' jes' run away. But we-all knows she done kill him, 'cause eber since he been missin' he done hant dat tree."

There was a slight pause as Joshua collected his wits. After the previous warning Forrester remained silent until the colored man was ready to go on with his story.

"One Sunday night, mah wife an' me come by yere on our way from church. An awful still night, Boss, an' ter'ble dark. When we got jes' yere, we heered a noise—click, click, click—jes' like dat. Den we heered cuss words—blasphemin' de Lawd something ter'ble. Den we heered mo' click, click. An' after dat—*sighs.* We don't wait to heah no mo', Boss. We jes' runned home an' got our heads under de cobers—quick! Marthy's awful fat, Boss, but mah goodness, how dat woman can run!

"Nex' mo'nin' Ah says to Marthy: What yo'all t'ink dat was we heered las' night?

"'Joshua,' she says, 'don't you know what dat was? Dat was dat Jamaica niggah woman's husban' diggin' his own grave! Dey such bad peopull de Lawd done sen' him away an' he had to come back yere an' dig a hole for hisself.'

"Eber since den, Boss, folks has heered funny t'ings aroun' dat tree. Sighin's, an' chain rattlin's, an groans. An' some folks say dey done seen funny lights floatin' roun'. Tain't no men gettin' dat money, Boss—no *suh*. It's de hant of dat Jamaica niggah woman's man gettin' money to gib to de debil! Boss, dere's lots of polismen done come from de city an' watch dat tree. Dey neber seen or heered nuthin'—but in de mo'nin' de money was gone! Dat means hants sure, Boss."

Forrester stood for a moment, gazing thoughtfully across the roadway. He was sure that he had unearthed something worth while by allowing this colored man to talk. Whether the man actually believed what he had told Forrester, or was just repeating a prearranged story, which someone had instructed him to tell, Forrester could not now determine. One thing was certain, however. Several singular and suspicious people *did* live near this tree. He made up his mind to investigate the colored woman who was reported to be living back in the woods, and also, at the first opportunity, to secure information regarding the young woman who was taking such an interest in the tree.

"Joshua," said Forrester, suddenly, "have you told this story to the young lady who is now living at your house?"

"Yas, Boss, Ah shuah did. De fus' time Ah foun' her at dis yere tree Ah done tole her all 'bout it, an' wahned her to keep away. She jes' laughed at me, Boss, an' said dere wasn't no such t'ings as hants. Why, Boss, dat young lady done been comin' down to dis yere tree ebery night since Sunday! She come *all alone*—by *herself*—in de *dark*! Ah know, Boss, 'cause Ah done follow her. Ah got to keep mah eyes on dat young Missey. Ah got to take keer of her, Boss."

Forrester glanced at his watch. It was after one o'clock and he decided to return to the city and think the situation over carefully before he undertook any further steps. Taking a coin from his pocket, he handed it to Joshua.

"You're a good story teller, Joshua," declared Forrester. "Here's a little present for you. I'm coming up to see you again sometime. Perhaps I'll drop over to your house to see you."

"T'anks, Boss, t'anks," exclaimed Joshua, pocketing the coin, and Forrester left him bowing and scraping as he went to his car and started back to the city.

CHAPTER VI—THE FLAMING HAND

As Green had told Forrester, he had some theories of his own about the people who called themselves the "Friends of the Poor." Like Humphrey, he did not believe that the West Side held any clues. He was more inclined to believe that the guilty people could be located within a comparatively short distance of the tree in which the victims were ordered to leave their money.

This theory of Green's, however, had developed solely from the fact that all activities of the band had ceased as soon as the ground was covered with snow. With snow on the ground, according to his hypothesis, it would be a comparatively easy matter to follow any tracks from the tree—at least for some distance. If similar tracks could be discovered near any house or houses in the neighborhood, a smart detective would have an excellent clue. On the other hand, Green conjectured that if a West Side gang were involved they would logically visit the tree in an automobile, and therefore have little fear of giving the detectives a clue from any tracks which they might leave between the auto and the tree.

The fact that the detectives who had watched the tree had failed thus far to hear or see anything, strengthened Green in this conviction. During their watch on the tree it was probable that all the detectives had remained at some little distance so as not to frighten off anybody approaching it with evil intent. For people living in the country, and familiar with the locality, it should be an easy matter to approach the tree noiselessly in the dark and then get away without being observed. In connection with these theories Green had worked out a plan, which Forrester's commission now enabled him to put into effect.

The murder of George Nevins, and the demand made on Forrester, coming close together, led Green to believe that the "Friends of the Poor," made bolder by past success, were now making a big drive on the rich men of the city. It was more

than probable, therefore, that other notices had been sent out, and that almost any night some victim could be expected to approach the tree and leave his payment. This, of course, would also mean a visit by the criminals.

On Wednesday evening, just as dusk was falling, Green dropped off the train, carrying a heavy bundle in each hand. He had carefully studied an automobile road map of the vicinity and found no difficulty in locating the oak tree. Jasper lane sloped away in both directions from a point opposite the tree so that Green could see a considerable distance in either direction. After a careful inspection of his surroundings, to make sure that he was not observed, he swiftly plunged into the heavy undergrowth at the side of the road directly facing the tree.

Green had carefully timed his arrival to give him a few minutes of daylight to arrange his apparatus, which consisted of a small storage battery and a powerful automobile spotlight. He drove a stick into the ground and attached the spotlight to it. The light was so arranged that it could not be seen by anyone passing on the roadway before dark. At the same time the light had a clear space through which to throw its beam directly on the tree when the current was switched on. Green connected the storage battery to the spotlight and tried the switch a couple of times to make sure that it was in working order. Then he sat down beside his apparatus, leaned his back against a tree, and prepared to await developments.

After darkness fell he found his vigil somewhat tiresome. He dared not smoke, nor strike a light of any kind, so it was impossible to even take note of the time. Under such circumstances time seems to stretch to an interminable length and the nerves get on edge. Green at length felt these effects from the waiting game he had started to play.

During his many years on the police force, and since beginning his career as a private detective, his work had been confined to well-lighted city streets. Lately, much of his time had been spent in brilliantly lighted resorts, keeping an appraising eye on the after-business-hours amusements of trusted employees. To step from these places to the thick woods on a dark, still night was something of a change, and as time passed Green was willing to admit it.

He had never before believed that such absolute quiet could be possible. All Nature slept. No chirp of bird voices, or hum of insects, could be heard. There was no sound save the occasional rustling of leaves overhead, the distant and weird call of locomotives on the railroad, and once in a great while the snapping of a twig in the underbrush, or the sound of something dropping through the trees. These were just the ordinary sounds of the woods at night, but to Green's

inexperienced ears they might mean anything, and many times one hand shot out to the switch on his lighting apparatus while the other grasped the automatic in his pocket. But each sound had stood by itself, and Green's nervous alertness relaxed as time wore on.

Suddenly Green's ears caught the sound of a stone overturned on the roadway. This was more like the sounds he had been expecting and his body stiffened to attention. A moment later he heard the sound again, a little nearer, and then a third time it came from the road directly opposite to him. To Green it could mean nothing but the cautious footsteps of someone approaching the tree. He continued to listen intently. Sure enough, there was a slight scratching sound in the direction of the tree. This was Green's long awaited opportunity. Abruptly he threw the switch and a broad beam of light made the great trunk of the oak stand out against the black background of the woods.

The sight was not at all what Green had expected to see. He quickly switched off the light and swore volubly yet softly. All that he had discovered was a night-prowling cat in the act of climbing the tree, probably in search of birds' nests.

The discovery that this sound had its source in a common, everyday house cat, greatly relieved the tension on Green's nerves. He readjusted himself to a more comfortable position and for some time paid little attention to the various sounds about him. Gradually, however, he became conscious of a sound that he had not heard before. To Green it appeared something like the whistling of the wind just before a summer thunderstorm, but looking up, he saw that the sky was unclouded and filled with a multitude of twinkling stars.

The sound continued at intervals, growing louder on each occasion, and at last Green realized, with a start, that it was distinctly like a human sigh. In a moment Green's phlegmatic constitution was upset. He became conscious of a slight chill in his spine and a peculiar tingling in his scalp. When, a moment later, he distinctly heard a metallic rattle like a person in heavy chains trying to move about, he swore audibly for comfort and promised himself that if he ever got back to the city alive, he would resign forthwith.

The sound of his own voice relieved him a little, and reason reasserted itself. Neither victims depositing money, nor the criminals who might be seeking it, would be apt to make noises like that. On the other hand, Green had never believed in the supernatural. He ascribed everything to a human agency, and he now argued that for whatever reason the sounds were made, some human being was back of them. He resolved that the next time a sound came to him he would throw on the light.

But that next sound was more uncanny than anything that had gone before, and as Green listened he temporarily forgot about the light. What he heard was the muffled tolling of a bell. The sound rose and fell on the still night; now seemingly close at hand; now floating far away.

Green was sure that it must be very close to midnight, and even though it had been earlier in the evening, it was not likely that anyone would be ringing a church or school bell. Moreover, he was confident that the sound he heard originated in his immediate neighborhood. Gradually the sound of the tolling bell grew fainter and seemed to drift away. Green threw on the switch again. He could see the tree and the space about it clearly, but there was no sign of anyone, and he could detect no movement in the undergrowth. Even the cat had silently disappeared. Green allowed the light to remain on for a minute, while he listened intently, and keenly inspected the scene before him. Then he switched the light off once more and resumed his watch. But Green was recalling certain eerie stories he had heard in years gone by, and there in the dark and silent woods many disturbing doubts besieged him.

For a time his eyes were blinded by the recent glare of his light, and the darkness shut him in like a wall. After a while, however, his eyes again became accustomed to the darkness and he could dimly see the gray road in the starlight. At the same moment that his vision had adjusted itself to the darkness, Green was conscious of something like a moving shadow in the roadway before him. He heard no sound, yet he was confident that someone or something had stopped in front of the tree. He did not hesitate this time but instantly threw on his light. It brought out in bold relief the figure of a woman walking up the path toward the tree. She stopped abruptly at the unexpected burst of light and Green realized that she would instinctively turn to see its source, allowing him to see her face.

Indeed, she had already begun that turning movement when Green's vision was suddenly shut off by a broad hand that covered his eyes, and he felt a long arm encircle his body. He struggled desperately, but the person who held him was too powerful. Green was like a child in that vise-like grasp. He felt a precipitate movement of the body of this person, followed by a crash in the roadway. Green needed nothing more to tell him that his lighting outfit had been kicked aside and probably destroyed.

Then Green felt himself unexpectedly propelled out into the roadway by a pair of powerful arms. He lost his balance and fell at full length. The dust rose in clouds about him, momentarily stifling and blinding him. All thought of the supernatural had now been driven from Green's mind. He had plainly seen a woman who could not possibly be a ghostly visitant, and he had been very roughly

treated by some other person who could not for one moment be considered as a misty, disembodied spirit. Green scrambled to his feet, pulling out his automatic as he did so, and stared about him. As far as the darkness would permit his gaze to penetrate Green could see no strange forms or movement anywhere, and the silence of the woods was unbroken. Whoever had been there had made good their escape during the time Green was stretched in the road.

Green stood with his back toward the tree. Glancing warily in all directions he slowly turned to face it. Then, as he looked toward the tree he became aware of a white, or greenish-white, misty glow that seemed to come from it. Gradually this light increased until he seemed to be able to dimly make out the small hole in the tree. Suddenly a more pronounced mass of light appeared. It was not a bright light; simply a hazy, greenish glow in the darkness, though it seemed to flame and smoke in a weird, peculiar manner. Green remembered having read or heard somewhere that specter forms were supposed to emit just such a light. While he stared, wild-eyed and shaking, the light apparently took the form of a hand pointing at him. And as he continued to look in petrified amazement Green realized that it *was* a hand—a flaming, smoking, ghastly hand. And then he saw also that the hand was slowly turning. At last he could perceive quite distinctly that the flaming hand was pointing in the direction from which he had come.

Green had had enough. He took the hint and started down the road as fast as his legs could carry him.

CHAPTER VII—SPIRIT CLUES

While driving down from the North Shore, Forrester decided to ascertain as soon as possible if either Green or the detective bureau had ever heard of the strange rumors regarding the oak tree, for it seemed to him that to the trained detective mind this might offer some suggestion. Forrester did not believe in the supernatural. Such occurrences must be backed by a human agency of some sort, and the knowledge of the existence of these occult manifestations, if carefully analyzed, might lead to the formation of a definite clue.

It was late in the afternoon when Forrester reached the city, but he did not delay his inquiries. He went first to Green's office, finding, of course, that the detective had already left to carry out his plan of night observation, although Green's office girl, trained to secrecy, said that she did not know anything about the detective's movements. Forrester then went to the detective bureau and related his story. Far from attaching any importance to the matter, the men there simply laughed at and ridiculed the story of a haunted tree, ascribing it solely to the well-known superstitious nature of colored people. They assured Forrester that it could have no bearing whatsoever upon the case, and he left the detective bureau more impressed than ever with the idea that the solution of the problem was entirely in his hands. Humphrey's general analysis now assumed greater importance in Forrester's eyes, for the reporter had predicted that Forrester would discover clues unnoticed or disregarded by the detectives. Here was a quick fulfilment of Humphrey's prophecy!

As Forrester closed the front door, after reaching home, his mother and sister hurried out into the hall to meet him. Mrs. Forrester threw her arms around his neck, while Josephine sympathetically took one of his hands in both her own.

"My poor boy!" exclaimed Mrs. Forrester. "Why didn't you tell us you were worried to death?"

"Worried!" echoed Forrester. "Where did you get the idea that I was wor-

ried?"

"Oh, Bob," explained Josephine, "we read that article in the *Times* this morning, and people have been calling us up all day."

"Why didn't you tell us you received one of those dreadful notices?" queried Mrs. Forrester.

"Because I didn't think it amounted to anything," answered Forrester. "There was no use upsetting you with a little thing like that."

"A little thing like that!" exclaimed Josephine. "Why they *killed* poor Mr. Nevins! When we didn't hear anything from you all day we were sure you had met with an accident."

"And the paper said you were so frightened, Bob," added his mother, "that we thought perhaps you had run away and hidden somewhere without letting us know."

"Damn!" exploded Forrester. "Wait until I get my hands on that reporter!"

"Arn't you really frightened?" asked Josephine.

"Do I look frightened?" retorted Forrester. "You mustn't believe all the rubbish you see in the newspapers. Those reporters have to invent half the stuff they write."

"But you *did* get a notice, didn't you, Son?" asked Mrs. Forrester.

"Certainly, but it's nothing to get excited about," grumbled Forrester. "I'll just put the money in that tree Saturday night and the whole thing will be forgotten. Prentice told me he had had the same experience once, and you see nothing ever happened to him."

"Oh, don't wait until Saturday," protested Mrs. Forrester. "Take it up right now and get the thing off our minds. The decorators are through and before we saw that newspaper article I had made all arrangements to move out to 'Woodmere' Saturday morning."

"Yes," added Josephine, "fix it up right now as Mother suggests, Bob. We would never dare move out into the country with this threat hanging over you, and I do so want to leave the hot city. Practically all our friends are up in the country now."

"Now look here, folks," protested Forrester, releasing himself from the embraces of his mother and sister, and throwing back his shoulders. "I'm the head of this house, and I command you to say nothing more about this matter. Let your arrangements for moving Saturday morning go ahead just as you had planned. I cannot do anything about delivering this money before Saturday night, as these men would not be expecting it until that time. Now, mind what I say and forget about it. It's all nonsense, coddling and worrying about a man who has come

safely through the war. The police are working on the case right now and you have absolutely no cause for worry or fear."

"But Mr. Nevins…." began Josephine.

"His case has nothing to do with mine," interrupted Forrester. "He was an old man in the first place; and in the second, he didn't take any precautions."

"But there have been others…." started Mrs. Forrester.

"Now, *now*, NOW!" exclaimed Forrester. "Don't say another word! You can safely leave this whole matter to me. Now then, Mother, have dinner served at once. I didn't have any luncheon and I'm hungry as a bear."

During dinner Mrs. Forrester referred to the fact that Mr. Nevins' funeral would take place on Thursday afternoon at three o'clock, and after promising to attend, Forrester did not again allow them to refer to the matter in any way. Dinner over, Forrester retired to a corner of the library, ostensibly to read, but though he occasionally turned a page of his book to keep up the pretense, his mind was absorbed in the problem of the "Friends of the Poor" and the working out of a plan of action for the following day.

At eight o'clock Thursday morning Forrester left home in his roadster and went straight to Green's office. The detective had had two nights and a day for investigation, and Forrester was anxious to know what facts he might have in his possession before continuing his own researches.

Green was at his desk when Forrester entered the office, and the young man noted the detective's dusty clothes, sickly pallor and the shadows under his eyes. Green must have been working hard, Forrester thought, and therefore would have information of importance.

"How-do," grunted Green, without rising.

"Good morning," returned Forrester, drawing a chair up to Green's desk. "I have an idea that you are going to give me some news."

"My God!" gasped Green, with such vehemence that the usual unlighted cigar dropped from his mouth and remained unnoticed on the floor.

"Well," queried Forrester, "what are you so upset about? Did you get a notice, too?"

"I've been through hell," groaned Green. "Ain't been to bed all night. Couldn't eat any breakfast. Damn Prohibition anyway! What I need right now is a whole goblet o' whiskey!"

Forrester laughed. "I can get that for you if I decide you need it for medicinal purposes, Green. But I should like to hear your story first."

"Couldn't you arrange the drink first, Mr. Forrester?" pleaded Green.

"No," returned Forrester, "I'd have to take you up to our country house, 'Woodmere', to get that for you, and I'm afraid you couldn't stand the trip until you get this trouble off your mind. Come on, pull yourself together and tell me what has happened."

"I hate to repeat it, Mr. Forrester. God knows, I don't even like to think about it!"

"You make me curious, Green. I'll bet you have got a clue—for it begins to look like you'd had a real fight with those men."

Forrester glanced down at Green's dusty clothes.

"Men?" snorted Green. "There ain't no men!"

Forrester gave a startled exclamation and looked at Green in amazement for a moment. The reply was curiously like that which the negro had made to him the day before.

"Mr. Forrester," continued Green, "I've been doin' police and detective work for twenty years. I ain't afraid o' no man livin'. Just show me a bunch o' tough mugs and I'll jump right in and clean 'em up. But I'm damned if I'll ever sit out in the woods at night again with rustlin' leaves, bodiless voices and burnin' hands! No, *sir*—never again! You don't want no detective to solve this case, Mr. Forrester—you want a spiritualist, or somethin' like that!"

"Look here, Green!" exclaimed Forrester. "You're too old and experienced a man—you've got too much common sense—to believe in stuff like that. Who has been telling you all these things?"

"Tellin' me?" gasped Green. "My God! I seen 'em myself, with my own eyes; heard 'em with my own ears. Nobody don't have to *tell* me nothin'. *I seen it!*"

"Mere trickery!" scoffed Forrester. "Someone was playing a joke on you."

"Damn it all!" cried Green, jumping up and pounding a huge fist on his desk. "Don't tell me I didn't see what I seen. I never had no superstition till last night, but believe me! You can tell me any kind o' a ghost story now and I'll *swear* to it. Take it from me, Sir Oliver Lodge and all them people ain't so cracked as we thought they was. I thought them city detectives was a bunch o' boneheads, but I apologize to 'em now—every one. I tell you, Mr. Forrester, here's a case that'll never be solved. It's some imp o' hell that leaves those notices at people's doors. No wonder they're found asphyxiated when they don't pay. It's coal-gas straight from hell that comes out and suffocates 'em. You'll never catch nobody takin' that money out o' that tree, 'cause you can take my word for it, when you put it in there, a ghostly, flamin' hand reaches over your shoulder and pulls it out again. Believe me, no human eyes is goin' to see the people that gets that money."

"Now look here, Green!" exclaimed Forrester. "I'm willing to admit that

something or other has given you a bad scare, and that you've lost your grip. What you need is a good breakfast and some hot coffee. Come on out with me and get your breakfast. You can tell me the whole story while you're eating."

Green mumbled objections, but Forrester continued to urge him until the man put on his hat and accompanied Forrester to a nearby restaurant. There, between gulps of food and the consuming of several cups of hot coffee, Green told his story across the table to Forrester.

At its close, Forrester lit a cigarette and sat in deep thought. To Forrester, Green's original theory that some or all of the "Friends of the Poor" lived near the tree, seemed extremely plausible. Crude as the detective might be, his reasoning in this regard apparently had a sound basis in the weird happenings as related by Joshua, and now confirmed by Green's experience. Combining the theories of both Green and Humphrey, and fitting them in with the negro's story and Green's tale, threw several hitherto unnoticed figures into the limelight. Forrester did not doubt for a minute that the woman revealed by Green's light was the girl referred to by Joshua. If so, then the man who had attacked Green was probably the big negro himself. A third person to be considered was the peculiar negress, said to live in the woods near the tree. Forrester remembered with a start Humphrey's triangulation theory. Here were three prominent figures with which to lay down a triangle. Surely he was making more progress in the quest than any of the detectives. These occurrences might only be indefinite spirit clues, but they pointed accusing fingers at several very definite people.

Though he had little faith in Green's ability as a detective, it was possible that the man's very stupidity might force him to stumble upon worth while clues, as in this instance; clues which Forrester later could make use of in his own deliberations. Thinking along these lines, Forrester decided that he would not allow Green to leave the case, as the man had intimated he would do.

"Green," said Forrester, at length, "you spoke in your office as if you wished to drop this case."

"You bet I do!" returned Green, emphatically.

"That would be foolish," remonstrated Forrester. "There's a good deal of money in it for you, and your reputation won't lose anything if you are on the ground when the case is solved."

"It'll never be solved," affirmed Green, positively.

"Yes, it will," declared Forrester. "I'm going to do it, with your help."

Green stared. "You ain't seen nothin' yet," he protested.

"Now, listen to me," went on Forrester. "On Saturday morning we open our country house. I want you to come up on the noon train with enough baggage

to last you all summer, or until we settle this case. You are to be my body-guard when I am home, and watch the house while I am away. Occasionally I may want you to look up certain things for me, but I will promise you right now that I won't ask you to go near that tree again unless I am with you. Our chauffeur has a nice place over the garage and I'll have him give you a room there, so you can be close at hand. Now, that's settled. The noon train, remember. And here's the address."

Forrester tore off a corner of a menu and wrote out directions for reaching "Woodmere."

Green wavered. "Well, I dunno," he said, hesitatingly.

Forrester leaned across the table.

"Green," he said, smiling, "we have a little private stock left in the cellar up there. Our guests are permitted to use it."

Green's eyes twinkled. "That might help to keep them ghosts away. One poison sometimes counteracts another, so I guess one kind o' spirits *might* chase away the other kind."

"Then the matter is settled?" asked Forrester.

"Sure thing," grinned the mollified detective. "But remember—I've got to have regular protection against ghosts."

CHAPTER VIII—THE GIRL ON THE HORSE

Taking Green to breakfast and listening to his story had occupied more time than Forrester had allotted for his interview with the detective. So, after leaving the city behind and entering the smooth and less frequented roads of the North Shore, he drove his roadster at a pace that would quickly have brought him into the toils of any local guardians of the law who might have spied his racing motor. Fortunately, they were reserving their watchfulness for a later hour of the day and Forrester kept up his swift pace until familiar landmarks told him that he was approaching Jasper lane.

He had just placed his hand on the gear lever when a horse and rider unexpectedly appeared coming out of a narrow side-road a short distance ahead. Forrester threw out his clutch and shifted his hand to the emergency brake. So great had been his speed, however, that the car slid for some distance along the oily roadway and passed directly under the horse's nose. Both horse and rider were startled. Snorting wildly, the horse reared on his hind legs with such suddenness that his rider was thrown to the ground. Forrester jumped from his car and ran back to see if he could be of any assistance. He discovered then that the rider was a girl, who had sprung quickly to her feet before he reached her.

"I am sorry," exclaimed Forrester, apologetically, removing his cap. "Are you hurt?"

"Oh, no," she returned, with a smile, "it was nothing at all."

"It was very careless of me," continued Forrester, "not seeing you sooner."

"Not at all!" returned the girl. "It was entirely my fault. I should have remembered that I was approaching the main motor highway and been more cautious." Her eyes twinkled, as she added, "Just like a woman, wasn't it?"

"Well," smiled Forrester, hesitatingly, "I wouldn't exactly say that."

"Oh, yes, you would," she asserted. "I know how you men talk about us behind our backs. You see, I have a brother."

"I would not take what a brother said as a guide to other men's opinions," suggested Forrester. "Brothers do not always fully appreciate their sister's charms."

"Am I to consider that as a compliment, or just a piece of information?" challenged the girl.

"I leave that to your own good judgment," returned Forrester.

The girl flushed slightly. "Would you mind catching my horse?" she requested.

Forrester glanced around and saw that the horse was ambling along by himself and already some distance away. Forrester started after the horse at a run, and thought with deep chagrin that the girl standing back there in the road was probably laughing at him. To run before a new acquaintance is never a graceful performance. He had seen a spirit of mischief lurking in the girl's eyes and he half suspected that her horse could have been recalled without this display of energy on his part. Probably it was his punishment for attempting to compliment her on such short acquaintance. Forrester caught the horse without difficulty, which convinced him that his supposition regarding the girl's purpose was correct. He took advantage of the return trip with the horse to study her carefully and deliberately; partly for his own information and partly to punish her for sending him after the horse.

He had already noted that her hair was slightly reddish in hue and very abundant, and that her eyes were brown. He now observed that she was tall, but not too tall, and slender, but not too slender. She was attired in a brown linen riding suit, with tan boots, and a white straw sailor hat. Whether accidentally or by design, the hat was tilted at just the right angle. That she was athletic and a good horsewoman was evidenced by her quick recovery from what would have been a very bad fall for the average woman.

She greeted him with a smile as he neared her.

"My, how you can run!" she exclaimed.

That he had been put on exhibition Forrester was now sure, and his resentment must have shown in his face, for she added, soothingly, "It is awfully good of you to take so much trouble for a stranger."

Forrester was distinctly attracted to the girl. She was so different from girls that he knew. He could not recollect a girl of his acquaintance who possessed such unquestionable beauty and engaging personality, combined with a self-reliance that detracted not a jot from her femininity. Small wonder that he felt a poignant

regret that they were about to part and probably never meet again. Almost unconsciously his thoughts took the form of words.

"Must we remain strangers?" he asked.

"Perhaps," she answered, placing her foot in the stirrup and vaulting lightly into the saddle. She smiled down at him and then, with a wave of her hand, started at a gallop up the road.

Forrester stood a moment watching her retreating figure.

"Perhaps!" he repeated to himself. "How am I to take that? 'Perhaps' might mean anything—yes, or no, or maybe. Who the deuce can she be? I'll have to ask Josephine if she knows her."

Going back to his roadster Forrester resumed his journey. It was his intention to pay a call on the mysterious negress, so just before he reached the oak he drove his car well up on the side of the road and alighted. With Green's story in mind he glanced around to see if any evidences of the detective's adventure remained. Almost in front of the oak he discovered the battered remains of the spotlight, and in the gulley across the road he saw a corner of the small storage battery. This removed any doubt Forrester might have had that Green had actually been at the oak tree. In fact, it seemed highly probable that Green had really met with the mishaps he described. If the detective had not been dreaming or drinking then there were certainly many strange things going on here and perhaps some real clues to be unearthed.

Forrester stood in front of the oak for some minutes, deliberating. Then he approached it and plunged his arm into the opening as he had done the day before. In thinking the matter over it had occurred to him that the oak might be hollow and someone concealed within it. After feeling carefully around, however, and digging his fingers once more into the rotten wood, Forrester was convinced that this hollow in which the packages of money were placed, and which was little larger than a man's head, was the only opening in the tree. The rest of the great trunk appeared to be absolutely solid.

Just as Forrester withdrew his arm from the opening he heard a sound behind him that resembled several persons walking. He stood erect and turned swiftly; then paused, staring sheepishly, like a bad boy caught in the pantry. Before him was the girl on the horse. Her left hand, which grasped the reins, was resting on the front of the saddle, while her right hand was buried in the pocket of her coat. Surprised and disconcerted as he was, Forrester nevertheless noted the easy nonchalance of her attitude. This time, however, she did not smile but sat regarding him with the suggestion of a frown on her face.

"Putting it in or taking it out?" she inquired, lightly.

"I—I—don't know what you mean," stammered Forrester.

She slightly raised her eyebrows. "I presume, if I were to ask you the question, you would tell me you did not know that oak has a bad reputation."

By this time Forrester had recovered his poise, and his newly acquired detective instinct asserted itself. The girl was evidently regarding him with something approaching suspicion, and it aroused in him an answering feeling of distrust. In these surroundings his mind was working rapidly. He recalled the young lady of Joshua's story, and the woman of the night in Green's recital.

"Has it?" asked Forrester, innocently, after a pause.

The girl regarded him keenly for a moment before she spoke.

"For a man who knows so little about it," she said, sarcastically, "you seem to have been in a great hurry to get here."

"I don't see why you should suppose this to be my original destination," returned Forrester. "Possibly the large size of this tree attracted my attention in passing."

"Perhaps," she said, and both smiled as they recalled the last time that word was spoken. Then she added, "But you have not *passed* yet. Your car is still some distance back on the road. Think of a better one."

"Tell me," exclaimed Forrester, "do you live near here?"

Her face hardened as she replied, "That is an unnecessary question at this time. I might even say that it savors of an evasion."

"I beg your pardon," said Forrester, stiffly.

Again the girl sat silently regarding him and Forrester met her eyes with a steady look. He surmised that she was appraising him and her next question confirmed his thought.

"Are you a victim?" she inquired.

"My dear young lady," returned Forrester, "about all we do is to ask each other questions. Sometimes *I* don't get an answer."

"I accept the reproof and apologize," she said, and smiled. "I live just a little way up this road."

"And I am—unfortunately—a victim," admitted Forrester.

"Now we're quits," laughed the girl. "Let's begin again."

"If this tree has a bad reputation," said Forrester, "I am curious to know why a girl, alone, takes a doubtful chance by talking to a strange man in its shadow."

The girl partly withdrew her right hand from her coat pocket.

"I'm not quite alone," she answered, and Forrester saw that she held a small automatic in her hand. "This has been covering you ever since I rode up."

"Certainly I shall now feel it incumbent upon me to answer all questions,"

smiled Forrester.

"All right," she retorted, quickly, "what is your name?"

"Forrester."

"*Robert* Forrester?"

"Yes, how did you guess?"

A wicked little smile stole over the girl's face. "You are the last person I should expect to see here," she declared.

"Why?" queried Forrester.

"I understood you were scared to death," she returned.

"That damned reporter again!" burst out Forrester, clenching his hands. "Wait until I get within reach of him!"

"My, how savage you are!" exclaimed the girl, with mock severity. But Forrester saw that her eyes twinkled.

"You will pardon my strong language," he said, "but this is not the first time that article has made me look foolish."

"Oh, then you're not *really* frightened?" she inquired, her eyes still flashing with humor.

Forrester opened his mouth as if to speak, but words failed him, and the girl threw back her head and laughed.

"Mr. Forrester," she said, at length, leaning down toward him, "you asked me a little while ago if we must remain strangers. I can now answer your question definitely. If you will come over to the house for a minute I will give you a letter of introduction, which I have, addressed to your mother. I had intended to deliver it in person, but after arriving here I found you were still in town."

Forrester was thunderstruck, and therefore speechless for a moment. This was too good to be true.

"My name is Sturtevant," the girl continued. Then added, with one of her mischievous smiles, "*Miss* Sturtevant."

"I shall be very glad, indeed, to deliver your letter, Miss Sturtevant," said Forrester. "Or if you prefer to wait until Saturday, you can deliver it in person as you first intended to do. We move out to 'Woodmere' on Saturday."

Forrester had no sooner said this than he could have kicked himself. He had wanted to have a look at the place she occupied and he might now be throwing away the opportunity. When he recalled the negro's words, it had seemed as if the girl lived alone. If she did, it would be both odd and suspicious under the circumstances. Forrester was anxious to ascertain this fact definitely, and he was pleased when the girl disregarded his suggestion.

"If you don't mind," she said, "I should like to have you come over to the

house now and get the letter."

"I shall be delighted," returned Forrester, this time without qualification. "If it is only a short distance I will walk."

"It is a very short distance," informed the girl. "It would be hardly worth while starting up your car." Then she added, "Especially if you plan to return here."

Forrester glanced up at her quickly, but she was already turning her horse back to the road and he did not meet her eye. Whether or not she had some object in what she said, or was simply poking fun at him, he could not tell.

Miss Sturtevant kept her horse down to an easy walk and Forrester found no difficulty in maintaining his place at her side. She made no further reference to the tree and its evil repute, so Forrester did not again bring up the subject, leading their light chatter instead into comments upon the surrounding country.

The Bradbury house, which Forrester now knew had been taken by Miss Sturtevant, stood only a short distance back from the road, and as they turned into the gate Forrester could see an elderly woman on the porch. A few minutes later she was introduced to him as Mrs. Morris, and during the short talk he had with her, while Miss Sturtevant was getting her letter, he gathered that she was a paid companion to the girl. Miss Sturtevant quickly returned with the letter for his mother, and after a few brief words, which included an invitation to Forrester to come again, they parted.

At the gate Forrester met the big negro, Joshua.

"Hello, Joshua," he greeted the negro.

"Howdy-do, suh."

"Any new stories about that haunted tree, Joshua?"

"No, *suh*! Mah Missey done say Ah talk too much." And the negro hurried on.

Forrester wondered as he returned along the road toward the tree.

CHAPTER IX—LUCY

Forrester had at first been in a quandary as to the character in which he should approach the negress. If she were open to suspicion it would be unwise for him to pose as a detective, or openly confess to being a victim of the "Friends of the Poor." As he weighed the matter, a recollection of Humphrey offered him a suggestion. Why not, for the moment, assume the character of Humphrey and approach her as a reporter? The fact that neither Humphrey nor the detectives had at any time referred to her, and that no one outside of Joshua had mentioned her, led him to believe that her retreat in the woods had remained unnoticed. A visit by him in the guise of a reporter would probably be the first of the kind that she had received. Although he knew Humphrey had not made use of a notebook while interviewing him, Forrester believed that a notebook would impress an ignorant colored woman. In her mind it would more fully bear out his claim to being a reporter. In accordance with this idea Forrester had provided himself with a new and imposing notebook which he was prepared to pull out as soon as he started his interview with the negress.

Leaving the road, Forrester followed the path around the oak and back into the woods. The thick foliage shut out every ray of sunlight and Forrester could well imagine how the gloom and silence of these woods would give full play to superstitious minds. If the negress were seeking to hide herself, the woods in themselves formed an eerie protection. The path turned sharply to the right just beyond the tree and Forrester had gone only a few yards when he was startled to find himself unexpectedly in front of her cottage. He had supposed the place to be more deeply buried in the woods, and this precipitant arrival at her door impressed Forrester at once with the negress' accusatory proximity to the oak tree. A savage snarl greeted Forrester as he stepped into the small clearing in front of the house and he saw a half-breed dog facing him with teeth bared and hair bristling. Forrester spoke soothingly to the animal but the sound of his voice

seemed only to enrage it the more and it barked loudly. He hastily glanced about for a club with which to defend himself in case the beast should attempt to attack him. Just at this moment, however, the cottage door opened and the negress stood in the doorway. She was tall and thin, with wiry, jet-black hair that contrasted strangely with the sickly yellow of her skin. Her eyelids drooped and at first Forrester thought she was squinting at him, but as he discovered later, this was a natural affection of the eyelids. It gave her a peculiarly sinister look and Forrester felt an aversion for her the moment she appeared in the doorway. She stood with her hands on her hips and silently looked him over.

"How do you do," said Forrester.

"Good afternoon," she returned, sullenly, her voice deep and harsh.

"Would you mind calling off that dog?" requested Forrester. "I want to have a chat with you."

"About what?" she asked.

"Oh, about yourself, and the oak tree, and what has been going on there lately."

"I don't know anything about it!" she snapped.

"I'm sorry," said Forrester. "I thought perhaps you would know something about it."

"What made you think that?" she demanded.

Forrester immediately fell into Humphrey's manner so far as he could recollect it. "I'm a reporter for the *Times*," he explained. "I have been assigned to write up a special feature article for next Sunday's edition about this tree that the 'Friends of the Poor' have been using, and the neighborhood. While scouting around I just now happened to discover your cottage. Naturally, it occurred to me that anyone living so near to the oak tree might know something about it."

There is a certain glamour and attraction connected with reporters, newspapers and special interviews which appears to appeal to persons in all stations of life. Forrester observed that his remarks had had a very softening effect upon the negress. She regarded him thoughtfully for a moment, then turned and administered a kick to the dog.

"Get out!" she cried, and as the beast slunk off into the woods she turned to Forrester. "Come in," she invited.

Forrester had observed that though the woman's voice was monotonous and expressionless in character, she used excellent English, without a trace of negro dialect. In her pronunciation, however, the slight accent peculiar to West Indian negroes was noticeable. Before the door had been opened Forrester had also noted that the cottage was a small one-story affair and as he now passed through the

door he marked a partition, with a doorway, running across the center, and concluded that the interior of the cottage was divided into two rooms. As the negress closed the door behind him Forrester quickly scanned the room into which he had been ushered. This was about twelve by fifteen feet, and quite obviously served as both kitchen and sitting room. A small iron cookstove stood in one corner, a table occupied the center of the room, and a rocking chair and two straight-backed chairs of ancient design completed the furnishings. On a small stand in the window next to the entrance door stood an old glass aquarium, covered with wire netting. It contained no water, however, and Forrester discovered several small snakes slowly coiling themselves around on the gravel in the bottom. It instantly recalled to his mind that the Voodoo worshippers of the West Indies used snakes in their ceremonies.

The woman crossed the room and seated herself in the rocking chair, but did not invite Forrester to sit down. He selected one of the straight-backed chairs, pulled it up to the table, and as he sat down drew out his notebook and spread it open on the table in an ostentatious manner that could not fail to impress the woman.

"What is your name?" he inquired.

"Lucy."

"Lucy what?"

"That's all—just Lucy."

"You've lived around here for some time, I suppose?" asked Forrester.

"About two years," she replied.

"Have you a husband?" he queried, glancing about the room as if he expected to see a man in some corner.

"I did have," she said, "but he ran away soon after we moved in here."

"Too bad—too bad," sympathized Forrester, as he made some notes in his book. Then he added, "Now, what can you tell me about the goings-on at this tree?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Well, frankly," said Forrester, "I haven't a very clear idea of what I do want to know. You see, that's just what I came to you about. I thought perhaps you could tell me something regarding what was going on here. Have you ever seen any of the men who make use of that tree?"

"No," she declared, "and no one ever will."

"What do you mean by that?" queried Forrester.

"No men ever come near that tree—just ghosts. It's haunted!"

Forrester stared for a moment. It was curious how all these people agreed

on that one point. He could understand how an ignorant colored man could have his superstitions aroused, and he could see how a plain man like Green might be tricked; but it was hard to believe that this apparently educated colored woman, living for two years within the shadow of the tree, could be fooled. This, he concluded, was suspicious circumstance number one, and as he glanced toward the snakes in the aquarium he strongly suspected that if she were willing, the negress could give him some inside facts regarding the manifestations at the tree.

"What do you keep those snakes for?" he asked, suddenly.

"They're part of my religion," she returned.

"Don't you go to church?" inquired Forrester.

"Not the church these niggers around here go to," she sneered. "I worship in my own way."

Forrester did not venture to question her further on this point, for he had read enough regarding the Voodoo worship to know that they were extremely reticent in describing their ceremonies. The possession of the snakes suggested to Forrester that this woman might even be a priestess of the sect, because he remembered having read that only the priests and priestesses were accustomed to using snakes in their ceremonies. Another thought came to Forrester at this moment, which gave him a decided start. Voodoo worshippers had been known to demand *human sacrifices*! Was he, after all, actually discovering clues which the detectives had overlooked?

"Well," he went on, again addressing the negress, "if there are ghosts instead of men hanging around that tree, perhaps you can tell me something about what they do. I'm sure this is going to make a most interesting story for my paper."

"I have never seen anything," explained Lucy, "but sometimes when I come home late at night I hear things."

"Such as—" suggested Forrester.

"Oh, groans and sighs—rattling chains—and sometimes the sound of a bell."

This was positive confirmation of Green's story, and Forrester pondered before asking his next question. He remembered Joshua's assertion that he had plainly heard words, so he asked:

"Do you ever hear voices saying anything?"

"Nothing distinctly. Just sighs and groans and sounds like that, as if somebody were in trouble."

"You think, then," said Forrester, "that it is just some uneasy soul that haunts that tree?"

"Yes," she replied.

"But," protested Forrester, "what could a ghost want with good United States

money?"

"I don't know," replied Lucy. "In my worship I sometimes commune with the spirits, but they have never told me how they could use money."

"Have you ever tried to commune with this ghost?" asked Forrester.

"No," replied Lucy. "I don't think it belongs to my people."

"Suppose I were to offer you a good sum of money to try to communicate with it?" suggested Forrester.

"I don't need money," she replied.

"Don't you have to work for a living?"

"No."

"How do you manage to live then?"

"I don't need money to live. I can get on."

Forrester glanced around the room once more. The cookstove appeared to be without a fire and there were no signs of food. He wondered.

Turning again to Lucy, Forrester said, "Strange about the ghost that haunts that tree, Lucy. Did you ever hear of anyone being murdered around here?"

"No," she replied. Then added, after a slight pause, as she rose and walked toward the door, "Guess you have found out all I can tell you, Mister. You'd better go now—before my dog comes back."

The uncanny atmosphere of the place, the nearby snakes in their glass prison, and the weird conversation regarding ghosts and singular forms of worship, had given Forrester a very uncomfortable feeling. He knew now why Green had temporarily lost his nerve, for he was quite willing to take the woman's undisguised hint about his own immediate departure. Slipping his notebook into his pocket and putting on his cap, Forrester thanked her for the interview and hurriedly passed through the door, which was slammed on his heels.

CHAPTER X—CROSSED THEORIES

The long drive into the city from the North Shore delayed Forrester so that he did not reach the Nevins' home until the funeral services had ended, and though he joined the cortège which followed the remains of the banker to the cemetery he did not have an opportunity to speak to his mother about the letter which the girl had entrusted to him. At dinner, however, he passed the letter across the table to his mother with the remark:

"There's a note I was requested to bring to you—and in which I am very much interested."

Mrs. Forrester withdrew the letter from its envelope, adjusted her glasses and glanced at the writing. Hastily she turned to the signature and exclaimed, "Why, it's from Helen!" Then, turning to Josephine, added, "You remember Mrs. Lewis, my dear. Her husband was appointed to the vice-presidency of a New York bank about two years ago. She wrote to me several times and then our correspondence gradually dropped off. I was thinking of her only recently, and wondering how she was getting on in New York."

"We remember her perfectly, Mother," broke in Forrester, impatiently. "We want to know what the letter says."

"We!" echoed Josephine, surprised. "I'm sure I'm not especially interested."

Mrs. Forrester glanced through the note. "It is a letter of introduction," she explained, looking over her glasses at Forrester. "How odd! Helen asks me to do what I can to make Miss Mary Sturtevant's stay in Chicago a pleasant one. Strange that she did not write me directly."

"Oh," breathed Josephine, smiling wisely at Forrester.

"Does she say who Miss Sturtevant is?" queried Forrester.

"The daughter of some very dear friends of Helen's. The Sturtevants are an

old New York family, she says. I'm quite sure that I have heard of them."

"May I be permitted to inquire," said Josephine, roguishly, "how Mr. Robert Forrester came to be the bearer of this note, and wherefrom springs his intense interest?"

Forrester colored, then frowned severely upon his sister.

"I met the young lady through an accident this morning. When she learned who I was she asked me to bring this letter to you. She had intended presenting it in person, but learned after arriving that we would not be moving to 'Woodmere' for some days."

"My! What a simple and straightforward explanation," smiled Josephine. "Why not tell us *all* about it, Bob?"

Forrester scowled at his sister, and sipped from his water glass to gain time to collect his thoughts. He was not sure at this time just how much he ought to tell. He set the glass down and briefly related how his car had frightened the girl's horse, leaving it to be assumed that she had at that time given him the letter.

"What an extraordinary coincidence!" exclaimed Mrs. Forrester. At that moment her attention was distracted by a question from the maid, and Josephine, leaning toward Forrester, whispered, "Some time I want to hear the *whole* story, Bob. It's so romantic!"

Happily for Forrester's peace of mind the conversation drifted to other things, and as soon as dinner was over he hurried to his favorite corner in the library. He wanted to think, not alone of Mary Sturtevant and her vague connection with the mystery, but of the negress, Lucy, and the perplexing new aspect she had given to the case. There seemed no apparent alliance between the two, yet both were strangely, though obscurely, associated with it. Forrester had no sooner lighted his pipe, however, when the door-bell rang, and a moment later a servant announced that two men wished to see him. For an instant he was startled, yet it did not seem likely that the "Friends of the Poor" would approach him in this open way.

"Did they give any names?" he asked.

"No, just said they were from the police department, sir," was the reply.

"Oh!" exclaimed Forrester, relieved. "Send them in."

Two heavily built men entered the room. They were strikingly alike in their general appearance; tall, broad shouldered, with big feet, large hands, and smooth-shaven, plump, ruddy faces. Forrester thought as he looked at them that there was small wonder so many criminals escaped. The average city detective was a type! Easily recognized and therefore readily avoided.

"Is this Mr. Forrester?" inquired one of the men.

"Yes," answered Forrester, as he rose from his chair.

"Well," continued the man, "my name's Cahill, and this is my partner, Detective Sergeant O'Connor. We come from the detective bureau."

"I'm glad to know you both," returned Forrester, smiling. "Sit down, please," and he indicated nearby chairs. The two detectives seated themselves and Forrester passed the humidor before returning to his chair. The three men puffed their cigars in silence for a time, the detectives evidently enjoying the flavor and aroma of Forrester's excellent cigars, while he awaited the explanation of their visit.

"We came to see you about this 'Friends of the Poor' matter," began Cahill, who appeared to be the spokesman for the pair. "My partner and me are working on the case."

"Making any progress?" inquired Forrester, fully convinced in his own mind, however, that they were not.

"Well, we are, and we arn't," answered Cahill. "You see, O'Connor and me were in the police auto the other night—the night you tipped us off. We're both some shots, and we felt pretty sure we had hit that car we were chasing. So we've been scouting around the West Side garages looking for a car with bullet holes."

"Why the West Side?" questioned Forrester, inwardly amused as he thought of Humphrey's arraignment of the detectives' methods.

Cahill smiled wisely at O'Connor, and O'Connor smiled significantly back at his partner.

"You see," explained Cahill, "we know crooks' ways pretty well. When anything gets pulled off we can tell from the method used just about where to look for our men. We have felt pretty sure all the time that this was some Black Hand bunch from the Dago settlement on the West Side. It's the same line of approach. The only difference is that they're operating a little higher up than usual, and choking the guys off quietly with some kind of gas, instead of filling them full of lead from a sawed-off shotgun. The idea's the same, only they're getting a little more ambitious—that's all."

"And about the car," prompted Forrester, still amused at the trend of the detectives' theories.

"That's just the point," continued Cahill. "Today we located a car with half a dozen bullet holes in the back in a garage out on Grand Avenue. Grand Avenue, you know, is full of Dagos all the way from the river. The garage man said it was left there late Tuesday night by three young Italians. Now, do you get the idea?"

Forrester did, and he was astounded at the news.

"You mean," he queried, "that you ascribe this whole affair to some West

Side Black Hand band, and that this car proves your theory?"

"Sure thing!" assented Cahill. "O'Connor and me have been working on this case for months. Sometimes we thought we had a clue, and then again we didn't. We have suspected Black Handers from the first, but we couldn't exactly get a line on them. That tip you gave us Tuesday night started things right. Now we know where we're at. There's three detectives in overalls in that garage right now, and if those guys come back for their car the whole thing'll be cleared up in a jiffy."

"What makes you think that this is the car you wanted?" persisted Forrester, still doubting the correctness of the detectives' theories.

"Headquarters has no report of any other car being shot at by the police. And this car was left late *Tuesday* night. Get the idea?"

Forrester pulled reflectively at his cigar. He was overwhelmed. The suspicions he had entertained regarding the weird negress, the girl on the horse and her colored servant, were knocked flat. The half-formed theories he had been building up around them were completely shattered. The growing pride he had felt in his own detective talents was crushed, and the discoveries in which he had exulted were rendered valueless. After all, the hard-headed, plodding, unimaginative city detectives knew their business best. There was really no mystery or romance to crime; no clever men pitting their brains against those of astute detectives. The criminal class was nothing more than the police claimed it to be—just a stunted, unnatural, evil-smelling plant, with its roots buried deep in the sordid, filthy dives and foreign settlements of the West Side. Forrester was disappointed; deeply disappointed. In spite of the danger, worry and uncertainty, the thing had gotten into his blood during the last few days. It had fired his imagination, stirred his latent energies, and awakened his brain. And now the whole elaborate structure which had been slowly building up toward the skies collapsed in one moment to reveal nothing save a few murderous thugs concealed in the cellar.

Forrester heaved a sigh.

"Relieved, eh?" chuckled Cahill. "Thought the police were no good, and that you had to kiss ten thousand bucks good-by?"

Forrester laughed. Now the humor of the situation struck him. Green's long study of the problem, his careful tabulation of information and secretly developed theories, were in the same class with Humphrey's suggested scientific solution, and Forrester's own investigations and conjectures. No wonder the Chief of Detectives had said, "Novices only hamper us."

"No," explained Forrester, in answer to Cahill's comment, "I hadn't exactly lost faith in the police. But I will say this: I have recently made some peculiar and interesting discoveries on my own account, and now you have practically

knocked the foundation from under them with your very matter of fact solution of the mystery."

"We ain't solved it yet, remember," objected Cahill. "We've simply got a line on the right people, and in due time we'll get our hands on them. We may still have to ask you to help us. That's what we dropped in for this evening."

"What do you want me to do?" asked Forrester.

"Well, you see it's this way," explained Cahill. "If those Dagos come back to the garage between now and Saturday, we'll have them. But if they get wise that we found the car, they may chuck it and steal another one. In that case we'll sure get them at the oak tree up there on the North Shore Saturday night. What we want you to do is to put that money in the tree at the time we tell you to, so that we will be ready."

"But nobody has ever succeeded in locating these people at the tree," protested Forrester.

"I know," admitted Cahill, grinning, "but O'Connor and me have worked out a plan. We figure that in the past these guys have been able to slip in between the detectives on watch. You see, it's pretty dark in those woods at night. Our plan is going to put a stop to that. It's like this:

"We're going to put a peg in the ground on each side of the tree, back and front. O'Connor will be on one side and me on the other. There'll be a string from each peg running to O'Connor, and the same thing on the other side to me. We'll hold these strings, one in each hand. Now, that completely surrounds the tree, so that anyone approaching will kick into a string. We'll know from the hand the string's in just what direction to look for them in the dark. O'Connor's strings will be A and B, and mine will be C and D. Get the idea?

"If O'Connor feels a tug, he'll yell A or B at me. If I get a feel on one of my strings I'll holler C or D. Get me? Then we'll both make a rush at just the right spot. Believe me, Mr. Forrester, we got them this time. No sneaking up between detectives *next* Saturday night."

"The idea sounds very good, Cahill," agreed Forrester. "Perhaps it will work. If I don't hear from you in the meantime, what hour do you wish me to approach the tree on Saturday night?"

"We've fixed on ten-thirty, if that is convenient for you, Mr. Forrester," answered Cahill.

"That suits me," declared Forrester.

"And now, we'll be going," announced Cahill, rising. "Thanks for the cigar. As fine a smoke as I've had in a long time."

"Bang up," murmured O'Connor.

"Take another along," suggested Forrester, accepting the hint.

The two detectives each carefully selected another cigar, and then Forrester went with them to the door.

"What will you do if the ghosts supposed to haunt that tree should appear?" inquired Forrester.

"You don't believe that stuff, do you, Mr. Forrester?" asked Cahill, scornfully.

"Well, several people, unknown to one another, have agreed on the details."

Cahill smiled. "Maybe so," he said, "but don't forget that O'Connor and me can shoot, Mr. Forrester. We can lay out any ghost that ever ghosted."

"You certainly have my best wishes for your success," said Forrester.

"Don't worry any more," assured Cahill, as he passed out. "The police have got this gang dead to rights *this* time. Saturday night will end it!"

CHAPTER XI—TELEPHONE CALLS

"Son," said Mrs. Forrester at breakfast Friday morning, "Josephine and I have changed our minds."

"About what?" prompted Forrester.

"We are moving out to 'Woodmere' late today instead of tomorrow morning. The Prentices are giving a dinner dance, the first of the summer season, Saturday evening. If we moved tomorrow we would be too tired and upset to attend. We do not want to disappoint the Prentices, especially as we understand the affair is given to introduce Miss Sturtevant."

"Does she know the Prentices?" exclaimed Forrester.

"Only through a letter of introduction, I believe," explained Mrs. Forrester.

"Of course, you will be there, Bob, now that you know who will be the principal guest," laughed Josephine.

"I haven't received an invitation," returned Forrester, gravely.

"Oh, the affair is quite informal," declared Mrs. Forrester. "All the invitations were extended over the telephone, because it was only decided upon at the last moment. Mrs. Prentice told me to be sure to see that you came. She wants you to meet Miss Sturtevant."

"Not realizing that Bob was such a forward young man and attended to his own introductions," interjected Josephine.

"That was only an accidental meeting, Josephine," protested Mrs. Forrester. "They had no opportunity to get really acquainted."

"I wonder?" said Josephine, with a side glance at Forrester. Then added, "Of course, Mrs. Prentice does not realize what a rival Miss Sturtevant will be for Diana."

Forrester glared at Josephine. Until she had taken up his recent meeting

with Mary Sturtevant, it had been her custom to tease him about Diana, Prentice's daughter. Josephine had professed to believe that a genuinely serious affair was developing, at least on Diana's part.

"Josephine," remonstrated Mrs Forrester, "you must not make light of Bob's interest in Diana. I should be most pleased to see Bob select her as his life's partner. Miss Sturtevant is here only for a brief visit, and they have met but once; simply by chance. One cannot be so much attracted to a chance acquaintance as to one who has been a friend since childhood."

"Very wisely spoken, Mother," approved Forrester, with a triumphant look at Josephine.

"I am satisfied to await the developments of Saturday evening," returned Josephine, and finished her breakfast in silence, while his mother explained to Forrester the details of the day's plans.

The knowledge that the solution of the case was now practically out of his hands left Forrester with a sensation of loss. Never before had he felt so thoroughly bereft of an object in life. He rather welcomed, therefore, the information that the household moving would take place on Friday instead of Saturday as originally planned. Throughout the morning he was busily engaged in assisting his mother and sister to pack, in the securing of a motor truck to carry their trunks and bags, and the various other little details connected with the removal of the household for the summer season.

Shortly after luncheon his mother, sister and the servants left in the big car. It was a dark, gray day with low-hanging clouds and a chill wind blowing off the lake. As Forrester stood by the curb watching the car disappear down the street, he found that a light, misty rain was falling. The weather affected him strongly under the circumstances and he returned to the house with a feeling of depression. Forrester seemed to find something sinister about the deserted house. The closing of the front door behind him echoed through the lonely rooms, and the thud of his feet was uncannily loud as he passed down the hall to the library.

Forrester laughed, shook himself and hunted up his pipe.

"The truth is," he said, aloud, as the tobacco glowed under the match, "my nerves are getting ragged."

In spite of the fact that the detectives had assured him that the solution of the mystery was close at hand Forrester could not fully convince himself that the matter was to be settled in so commonplace a way. The discoveries which he had made must surely possess some significance. It did not seem possible that a band of West Side Italians, far away from the oak tree on the North Shore, could be back of the so-called ghostly manifestations of which he had heard so many rumors,

and which Green claimed to have actually witnessed. If these apparitions had no connection with the "Friends of the Poor," then what was their purpose?

Busily engaged in his amateur detective work, and full of a certain confidence in his own ability, Forrester had half expected to solve, in a few days, a mystery that had baffled experienced detectives for a year. Now, with the final reckoning only one day away, he realized that he had made practically no progress, except, perhaps, to increase the scope of the mystery. Possibly the fact that he felt himself free to come and go in comparative safety until Saturday had blurred his view of the future. Here in the still, deserted house, however, the misgivings that had been dormant beneath his energetic efforts to solve the problem, now came to the surface. The partial doubt which he had felt the previous evening in respect to the detectives' theories, now reasserted itself with increased force.

While his own theories were mere chimerical pictures, based upon a fanciful explanation of the peculiar facts he had unearthed, Forrester nevertheless had a feeling that they possessed more real substance than was apparent at the present time. Again Forrester laughed and tried to shift his thoughts to the seemingly more logical and matter of fact deductions of the detectives.

During these meditations he had been pacing the library floor, several times refilling his pipe. Now he went to the fireplace and lit the gas logs in an effort to dispel the chilly, gloomy atmosphere that pervaded the room. He drew a chair up to the fireplace and sought more cheerful thoughts in recollections of Mary Sturtevant. This did not help. Aside from the girl's attractive personality, Forrester could not but realize that it was the faint element of mystery that seemed to surround her which had stimulated his curiosity and thrown a glamour about her such as no other girl of his acquaintance had ever possessed. Yet that very element of mystery was a disquieting feature. In spite of any arguments he might devise to ease his own mind, Forrester realized that if he were to tell the men at the detective bureau all the details of his acquaintance with Mary Sturtevant he would create a disagreeable stir. While the peculiar effect of her sudden appearance from nowhere had been partly offset by her letter of introduction to his mother, it still remained an odd coincidence that she should select a home so near the blackmailers' tree, and in addition take such a strong interest in the tree itself. And then there was the reprimand which Joshua intimated she had given him for talking about the tree to a stranger. Moreover, what object could a young woman of her undoubted social position have in leaving her family in the East and renting a big house in a Chicago suburb with only a paid companion?

It was no use. In whatever direction he turned his thoughts Forrester's mind reverted to the mystery of the "Friends of the Poor." Glancing at his watch, he

found that these thoughts and speculations had consumed a large part of the afternoon and he decided to get away from the dreary surroundings and gloomy inspirations of the empty house by going out to dinner.

The slight drizzle of the afternoon had increased to a heavy downpour of rain which beat loudly on the windows, while a strong east wind roared about the house. The inclemency of the weather increased the feeling of loneliness and isolation which had seized upon Forrester since the departure of his family. He sprang up, therefore, with a sensation of pleased anticipation when the door-bell rang, but paused immediately to reconsider his action.

Most of his friends were already at their summer homes. It did not seem likely that even the few stragglers who might have remained in town would be out on a night like this. For the first time since the affair started Forrester felt like arming himself. He opened the drawer of the library table and took out a revolver which had lain there unused for many years, only to discover that it was unloaded, and as he could think of no place where he might find the necessary cartridges for it, the weapon was useless. He reasoned, however, that its appearance in his hand might in itself be a partial protection, so with the revolver apparently ready for instant use, Forrester went to the front door and opened it.

No one was there, and the street lay apparently deserted in the driving rain.

It was a strange incident and when Forrester returned to the library he wondered whether it was a wise step for him to remain alone in the house that night. He was still debating the question when a half-hour later the telephone bell rang. Picking up the receiver Forrester was relieved to recognize the voice of Prentice on the wire.

"I called at your house a little while ago," apprised Prentice, "and was alarmed that the door-bell was not answered. After thinking it over I decided to phone you."

"There is no one here but myself," replied Forrester. "The folks moved to 'Woodmere' today. I stayed in town because I have a little job to attend to in the morning. That must have been you who rang the bell about a half-hour ago. I *did* answer the bell—and was amazed when I found there was no one at the door."

"You took a thundering long time to answer," said Prentice. "It seemed to me that I stood a long time in the rain. I am at the Drake hotel now. My car is handy and I will be over in a couple of minutes."

"All right," replied Forrester, "I will be watching for you."

Hanging up the receiver, Forrester went to one of the front windows and took up his promised watch. The car arrived promptly and Forrester opened the

door. Prentice hung up his hat and raincoat in the hall and Forrester led the way to the library.

"The house looks dark and dismal," commented Prentice, as he seated himself and drew out a cigar. "Why don't you turn on more lights?"

"It did seem a bit lonesome before you came," admitted Forrester. "I don't believe more light would help. To me it would simply emphasize how large and deserted the house is at this moment. How do you happen to be in town on a night like this?"

"We expected friends from Rockford," explained Prentice, "to stay with us over the week end. You know we are giving a dinner tomorrow evening."

Forrester nodded.

"I stayed in town to meet them," continued Prentice. "When they did not arrive and I found it was to be such a bad night, I decided to stay at the club, instead of going home. The time was dragging, for it seemed that practically everyone I knew had left town. Then I thought of you and concluded I would run up and pay you a little visit."

"I am very glad you did," approved Forrester, "for I am willing to admit that I miss the family now that they have gone."

At that moment the telephone bell rang sharply.

"Looks like you were not going to be so lonely after all," observed Prentice.

Forrester picked up the receiver.

"Hello!" said a man's voice. "Is that you, Mr. Forrester?"

"Yes," replied Forrester.

"I want to get a little information," informed the voice. "I believe you expect to put some money into a certain tree tomorrow night."

"Who are you?" demanded Forrester.

"That is of no immediate importance," returned the voice. "What I wanted was to find out the exact time at which you intended to place the money in that tree."

"I am not giving any information to strangers," snapped Forrester.

"I am sorry," returned the voice in a conciliatory tone, "but I can't give you any particulars at this time. It is important, however, that I know at what hour you intend to visit the tree."

"Better call up the detective bureau," retorted Forrester. "Good-by," and he hung up the receiver.

Prentice was leaning toward Forrester with a puzzled expression on his face. "That was a peculiar conversation," he said. "May I ask what it was about?"

"A man whose voice I did not recognize," explained Forrester, "was trying

to find out at what hour I intended to place that extortion money in the tree tomorrow night. He wanted *his* information without giving me any."

"Strange," murmured Prentice. "Perhaps it was a newspaper man—or a detective."

"No need for them to disguise their identity," asserted Forrester. "I certainly have talked freely to all of them."

Prentice sat in thoughtful silence for a few minutes, and Forrester was equally absorbed in trying to fathom the object of the person who had called him up. Their thoughts were interrupted by another clamorous ring on the telephone. Again a man's voice came over the wire when Forrester took up the receiver. This was a very different voice, however; coarse, with a slightly foreign accent, and rough in its address.

"That you, Forrester?" asked the voice.

"Yes," answered Forrester, gruffly. "What do *you* want?"

"This is the 'Friends of the Poor'," came back over the wire.

"'Friends of the Poor'!" repeated Forrester, astonished and Prentice sat up suddenly in his chair.

"Yes," affirmed the voice. "We're tired of fooling around with you and we want to know something definite."

"What do you wish to know?" inquired Forrester, less harshly.

"We want to know the exact hour at which you will put the money in the tree tomorrow night."

Forrester hesitated. He glanced at Prentice, who was leaning toward him, an interested listener, and reflected whether or not to ask his advice. Forrester's own impulse was to treat the man as he had the first caller. It occurred to him, however, that if this man really did represent the "Friends of the Poor," as he claimed, it would simplify matters for the detectives if a definite hour were arranged. He remembered Cahill's instructions to approach the tree at ten-thirty.

"I had planned to go to the tree about ten-thirty," finally announced Forrester.

"That's all right," said the voice. "Be sure you make it ten-thirty sharp—and no dicks, remember!" The wire suddenly became dead as the man at the other end hung up the receiver. Forrester hung up his own receiver and turned to Prentice.

"What's this about the 'Friends of the Poor'?" exclaimed Prentice.

"That man said he represented the 'Friends of the Poor'," replied Forrester. "He wanted me to give him the exact hour at which I would place the money in the tree."

"That's a strange proceeding," muttered Prentice.

"Strange?" queried Forrester.

"That they should take the risk of calling you up on the phone," explained Prentice.

"Things are getting rather hot for them," declared Forrester. "They realize it, and probably do not want to take a chance by staying near the tree for too long a period. The man warned me not to have any detectives at hand."

"He did!" ejaculated Prentice.

There followed a moment's silence while Prentice relit his cigar.

"Tell me, Bob," he requested, at length, "have you made any definite plans about tomorrow night?"

"Yes, I'm coming to your house for dinner for one thing," smiled Forrester.

"You know what I mean," said Prentice, seriously. "You have trifled with this 'Friends of the Poor' matter long enough. What have you decided to do—are you going to pay the money or fight?"

"Both," answered Forrester, laughing. He then explained to Prentice the major details of his own and the detectives' plans for Saturday night.

"And you mean to say, Bob," gasped Prentice, "that these detectives have actually located the 'Friends of the Poor'?"

"Not located them, exactly," returned Forrester, "but they have a very strong suspicion."

"Against whom?" asked Prentice.

"A band of Italians on the West Side," divulged Forrester. "They have secured what they claim to be certain evidence and expect to capture the men at the tree tomorrow night."

Prentice smiled. "That's not the first time I've heard that police theory," he declared. "Still, there may be something to their idea, after all, in view of the telephone calls you received this evening. There should be interesting developments tomorrow night. But, Bob," he added, "take my advice and leave this matter entirely in the detectives' hands. Don't fail in your part of the matter. Place your money in the tree at the hour you agreed upon and then get away as quickly as you can."

"You take the matter too seriously," objected Forrester.

"And you don't realize how serious the affair is, Bob," asserted Prentice. "The claims of these detectives have given you too much confidence. Even if they do capture some men tomorrow night, there may be others of the band who will seek revenge. I cannot urge you too strongly to place that money in the tree and assure your own safety. The history of the case—"

Prentice was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone bell once more. He

paused, with an astonished look on his face, and Forrester laughed.

"Unquestionably my busy night," said Forrester, as he picked up the receiver.

Forrester's face also expressed amazement, as he listened, and he placed one hand over the transmitter while he remarked in an aside to Prentice, "A woman's voice this time!" Then, speaking into the telephone, he said, "Yes, this is Mr. Forrester."

"I want to get some information," said the woman's voice, "that is vitally important to you. I must know at what hour you will place the money in the tree tomorrow night."

"Who are you?" inquired Forrester.

"I cannot tell you that now," replied the voice, "but let me assure you that I am absolutely friendly to you. It is chiefly in your interest that I want this information."

"But," protested Forrester, "it is a matter in which I cannot be too free in furnishing information to strangers."

"I know," admitted the voice, "but you'll have to trust me for the present."

"Are you a lady reporter?" asked Forrester.

"No."

"Are you securing the information for a reporter?"

"No."

"Are you connected in any way with a newspaper?"

"No."

"Are you a lady detective then?" and Forrester could not restrain a slight laugh.

"It is useless for you to ask questions," declared the voice. "I am asking information—not giving it."

"But favors beget favors," protested Forrester.

"You are not doing me a favor," returned the woman. "This is in your own interest."

"Well, then, if you insist," acceded Forrester, "I will take the risk and inform you that I expect to visit the tree at ten-thirty tomorrow night."

"Thank you," was the reply, and the receiver was hastily hung up.

"I don't understand these telephone calls at all," said Prentice. "What do you make of them, Bob?"

"I fancy your first idea was correct," returned Forrester. "It is my opinion that these thick-headed detectives have talked too freely to the newspaper reporters about their new plan, and that we are simply going to have a convention of the press at the tree tomorrow night."

Prentice laughed heartily. "Perhaps you are right, Bob," he agreed. "If I had not had such a trying experience with these people myself, I should have liked to be a spectator, too. As it is, I imagine it will be safer to keep out of the way. And now," he added, rising, "I believe I would better go. I want to drive out early in the morning, and you, too, should have a good night's sleep."

Forrester accompanied Prentice to the door and stood until he saw the car disappear in the rain and mist. Then he returned to the library. The windows still rattled under the lash of the wind and rain, and somewhere far up in the house he heard a door slam.

"I don't think I'll do much sleeping tonight," thought Forrester, and crossing to the library table, lifted the lid of his humidor to get a cigar. He paused with a startled exclamation, for there before him lay a small square of brown wrapping paper. On it he recognized the crude skull and rough hand-printing of the "Friends of the Poor." The words stood out clearly in the light shed by the lamp on the table. He read:

> *Your efforts to trace us are known. We prefer your death to your money but will overlook your activities if you cease them at once and raise amount of your payment to $25,000. This opportunity ends positively at midnight Saturday.*
>
> Friends of the Poor

CHAPTER XII—SATURDAY

"Woodmere," the Forresters' summer estate, lay between Sheridan Road and the lake. The house, a long, two-storied building of white stucco, with green shutters and a green tile roof, looked much smaller than it really was because of the many great trees that towered above it. On the lake side a wide, paved terrace extended the length of the house. A short stretch of lawn spread from the terrace to the edge of the little bluff that dropped down to a sandy beach. On the edge of this bluff stood a vine-clad pergola, furnished with comfortable willow chairs. Here, on warm summer days, Forrester liked to sit with his pipe, and the ladies brought their reading and fancy work. From the pergola one had a wonderful view up and down the shore line, while the great lake stretched as far as the eye could see. Even during the sultry days of midsummer this spot was sure to pick up a cooling breeze.

Large ornamental gateways stood at the north and south ends, and from these a wide driveway swung in a crescent shape up to the front door. A branch drive turned off at the south side of the house and passing the end of the terrace wound through a mass of shrubbery to the garage.

Shortly after noon on Saturday Forrester turned his car in at the south gateway and drove to the garage. The doors stood wide open, and William, the family chauffeur, who was working on the big car, came out to take charge of Forrester's roadster.

"I'm glad to see you arrived safe, sir," William greeted Forrester. "The ladies were a bit worried at your staying alone in the town house last night. Stormed dreadful here, sir."

"It was a bad night, William," agreed Forrester. "But that's just the sort of night to make one sleep soundly. Did that man, Green, arrive?"

"A few minutes ago, sir. He's up in his room now."

"I'll go up," said Forrester, and entering a door at the side of the garage,

climbed to the chauffeur's quarters. Green had been given a cozy room overlooking the lake and Forrester found him in the midst of his unpacking.

"Gee!" exclaimed Green, on sighting Forrester, "I hope that mystery ain't solved all summer. I sure like this here room."

"The mystery will be solved tonight, I believe, Green."

"What!" gasped Green. "Who's got the dope? Not them city dicks?"

"You guessed it. Drop that work for awhile, and I'll tell you the whole story. Here, have a fresh cigar," offered Forrester, catching sight of a cold and much-chewed cigar end in the corner of Green's mouth.

The two men sat down near the window and lighted their cigars.

"An amazing lot of things have happened since I saw you on Thursday, Green," began Forrester. "For a time I thought I was getting on the actual trail—then the city detectives called Thursday night and told a plausible story that knocked all the props from under my theories; and yours, too, for the matter of that."

"Huh!" scoffed Green.

"I know how you feel," assented Forrester. "I wondered myself, until an incident occurred Friday night which half convinced me they were right. Now, let me tell you the whole story, and then we will talk it over. One thing I want to impress upon you, however. Some things I am about to tell you, especially about a certain young lady, are to be kept absolutely quiet—no matter what happens."

"That's part o' my business," assured Green. "A detective don't get nowhere if he talks too much."

"I'll take that as a valuable hint," laughed Forrester.

He then related the occurrences of the last two days; his meeting with Mary Sturtevant, his visit to Lucy, the call from Cahill and O'Connor, their theories and plans, the mystifying telephone calls, and finally the startling discovery of the notice in his humidor.

"And now," Forrester concluded, "I want your opinion on all these facts. Forget your natural animosity to the city detectives, Green, and consider their clues and theories in the light of cold reason."

Green shifted his chair so that he could rest his feet on the window sill, relighted his cigar which had gone out while Forrester talked, and smoked for a while in silence.

"Look here," he said, at length. "You remember *my* theory and arguments that these here 'Friends o' the Poor' lived *near* that tree?"

"Yes," replied Forrester, "and that newspaper fellow, Humphrey, had something of the same idea. I half agreed with both of you after my discoveries."

"All right," continued Green, "I'll bet you a week's pay them *Italians* out there on the West Side—miles away—are just plain auto bandits. They're pullin' some game o' their own, and most likely never even heard o' the 'Friends o' the Poor.' Them city dicks is coverin' up their poor work by misleadin' you. Get me?"

"But the telephone calls," protested Forrester. "Especially the man's voice with the foreign accent!"

"Bunk!" sneered Green. "Reporters, most likely, tryin' to get next to your plans. See here," he added, dropping his feet to the floor and shifting his chair to face Forrester, "I bet there's so many o' them reporter guys around that tree tonight that the 'Friends o' the Poor' can't get near it!"

"And that notice—unaccountably slipped into my cigar humidor while I sat in the library. How do you place that?"

"*That's* the only *real* thing that happened," maintained Green. "But it ain't any way mysterious, though they tried to scare you into thinkin' it was. Them guys just crawled through a window while you was out to dinner. It was there all the evenin'—only you didn't happen to want a cigar till late, that's all. Did you find any open or unlocked windows?"

"Not on the first floor. I discovered a second floor window open after hearing a door slam."

"Any floor would suit them guys," asserted Green. "Take it from me, Mr. Forrester; you and me's nearer the solution o' this thing than them city bulls. We're right on the ground *now*, and we're goin' to locate somethin'. Let them detective guys play around with their *Italians*. They'll never get 'em near that tree—never on your life!"

The library at "Woodmere" faced the terrace, upon which a row of French windows opened. Forrester sat by the big center table that evening, idly turning the pages of a book. Heavy footsteps clattered along the terrace, and a moment later Green entered at one of the windows.

"I was waiting for you," Forrester greeted him, rising as he spoke. "My mother and sister have just left. Now, one last word of instruction, Green. You're to stick close to the windows of the drawing room over there at the Prentices'. After dinner I will walk to one of the windows with Miss Sturtevant. Take a good look at her. While I'm away try and keep an eye on her. If she slips out, trail her! That's your job for tonight."

"Count on me," assured Green. "Is that the money?" he asked, indicating a long flat package on the table.

"That's the package I'm going to put in the tree."

Green picked up the package and weighed it in his hand while his eyes sparkled. "Gee!" he exclaimed. "Twenty-five thousand bucks!"

"No," laughed Forrester, "only a few ounces of paper!"

"Goin' to fool 'em, eh?" grinned the detective.

"That's what I hope to do. I made a very open and noisy visit to my bank this morning, and remained for some time in the president's private office. The idea was to give anyone who might be watching the impression that I was drawing the money from the bank. What actually happened, however, was that I explained my plans to the president, and he instructed a clerk to make up this dummy package."

Forrester took the package from Green and slipped it into an inner pocket. "Come," he said, and led the way out to his car.

"Am I too late to ask for the first dance?" inquired Forrester, as he approached Mary Sturtevant after dinner.

"I'm sorry," she replied, smiling, "but you were very late in arriving. A New Yorker seems to be popular in Chicago."

"Depends greatly upon the New Yorker," returned Forrester.

"You haven't changed a bit since Thursday, have you?" cried the girl. "How many dances do you wish?" and she extended her card.

"I'm afraid," declared Forrester, a doleful note creeping into his voice as he glanced over the card, "that I shall have to forego any. I must leave before you have completed this long list of engagements."

"Oh, of course," she exclaimed. "I had forgotten. You have a *most* important engagement yourself at ten-thirty."

Forrester looked at her sharply.

"How do you know?" he asked.

Miss Sturtevant looked surprised.

"Why, you told me—and it has been in all the papers."

"Not the exact hour," returned Forrester, his eyes still observing her keenly.

"Oh," she murmured, flushing, "wasn't it? Well, then, I must have heard it somewhere."

"Over the telephone, perhaps," suggested Forrester.

"One hears gossip in so many ways, it is hard to remember the source," she returned, easily. "If you won't have time to dance, we can at least chat until the dancing starts. Let's look for a quiet corner."

It was an opportunity which Forrester welcomed. He guided her carelessly toward one of the large windows that opened out on the lawn. The musicians, concealed among palms and flowers at the other end of the room, were playing

a tender little air—one that seemed to throw a mantle of romance about them. Forrester looked down at the girl in silence. It seemed hard to believe that she could in any way be linked with the abominable men who had committed so many murders, and now, threatened his own life. Yet her actions had been strange, and her slip of a few minutes before seemed inexplicable. In spite of his misgivings Forrester longed for the girl. Love at first sight had always seemed a mere trick of the novelist to Forrester. As he stood there beside Mary Sturtevant he knew that in his case at least it was a fact! Whoever or whatever she was, he wanted her! If she had made a mistake—well, then he would save her from herself.

"I thought we came here to chat," and she smiled mischievously up at him.

"I think we have been chatting," he returned, and added, "with our minds."

Once more Mary Sturtevant flushed slightly. "You could never guess what I was thinking," she declared, watching him with a peculiar smile.

"I wish I could," he replied, earnestly. "It might solve my greatest problem."

"Sometimes you say such strange things," she asserted. Then, as the music for the first dance started up, she added, extending her hand impulsively, "There, I must go. I wish you the best of luck tonight."

Her last words struck him as ominous. How often he had heard a similar phrase on French battlefields just before a futile sortie. He seized her hand, held it a trifle too long, perhaps, and murmured, lamely, "Thank you."

Then, as she was swept away by her first dancing partner, Forrester slipped through the window to the lawn. After that few minutes of delightful nearness to her he did not want to dance. To hold another girl to him now would seem like sacrilege. He was glad that he had neglected to place his name on any dance cards.

"She's *some* girl, ain't she, Mr. Forrester?" whispered a gruff voice at his side, and romance fled at the sight of the prosaic Green.

The thought that this rough man was to spy upon the girl who had just left his side was revolting to Forrester in his present mood. He had the comforting feeling, however, that it was for her own good. If she had entangled herself in some way with these people he would save her!

"That's the girl you must keep an eye on, Green. And," instructed Forrester, "see that she is protected also. If anything happens to her tonight you'll have to answer to me."

"I getcha," assented Green. "You don't want them bulls to beat you to a capture."

"What's the plot?" called a cheerful voice, and the two men turned quickly to find Prentice close at hand.

"I thought you were dancing by this time," said Forrester.

"Haven't danced for years," returned Prentice. "I came out to have a quiet smoke, and just spotted you fellows with your heads together."

"This is my body-guard, Detective Green," stated Forrester.

"Looks like an able-bodied protector," laughed Prentice. "But I suppose you won't need him after tonight." Then he added, throwing his cigarette away, "Think I'll go in. You'll be back, won't you, Bob?"

"I hope to return if all goes well."

"Remember my advice—get away from the tree if there is going to be a battle. See you later," and Prentice strolled in through the window Forrester had recently left.

"Ten o'clock!" exclaimed Green, consulting his watch. "Gee, you swells eat late. Better start, hadn't you?"

"I think I will," decided Forrester. "There's just about time to walk over, instead of using the car."

Green watched Forrester until he disappeared in the darkness, then strolled over to a large tree which commanded a view of all the windows on that side of the house. If any other person contemplated leaving the dance Green was sure they would try to slip out of one of these windows, selecting that way as the one least likely to attract attention. In the deep shadow under the tree the detective appeared a part of the trunk against which he leaned.

Presently, though no sound had reached Green, he saw a man's figure appear in silhouette against the lighted window which faced him; a tall, broad-shouldered man, wearing a sack suit and a cap. Green knew from his dress that he was not one of the guests. While the man might be only a chauffeur, or a neighbor's employee, Green decided to take no chances, and remained in motionless expectancy. His suspicions grew as he noted that the man did not attempt to peer in as a merely curious visitor would have done. Instead he remained where he had paused when Green first discovered him, standing in the same tense, motionless attitude as the detective. Either the man was keeping watch as Green was doing, or he was there to keep an appointment.

Green was enlightened in a few minutes. The music ceased and immediately afterward he saw Mary Sturtevant appear in the window. Glancing hastily about, probably to make sure that she was not observed, the girl quickly stepped through the window and into the shadow at one side. A low, peculiar whistle came from the man, and the girl instantly reappeared as she approached him. Green could not hear their greeting, but they turned and moved toward his place of concealment, evidently seeking the shadow of the tree for a conference. Green

cautiously moved around the tree, placing its massive trunk between himself and the approaching couple. They came so near that Green dared not look around the trunk at them. He stood with his back pressed against the tree and listened.

"And now, tell me how matters stand tonight," requested the man, evidently ending a report of his own.

"No one has left the room except Mr. Forrester," replied Mary Sturtevant. "He started for the tree a few minutes ago."

"Take anyone with him?"

"I'm not sure. He arrived with that private detective and he may have taken him along."

"Very likely," assented the man. "And there will be city detectives there, too, that I know. It will be very difficult for anybody to approach that tree tonight. It may spoil our plans."

"Mr. Forrester's case certainly seems to be attracting more attention than the others," commented the girl.

"That's because he is putting up a real fight. To tell you the truth, I have my doubts about the package of money he is putting in the tree tonight. It probably isn't worth the danger involved to get it."

"Do you think he will take the risk? Surely he knows that punishment would be certain."

"I think it will take a lot to scare that chap. He will probably still be fighting after we have listed other victims. I must hurry now if I am to get there on time. I'll phone you after you get home."

"Yes, do; I shall be worried until I hear from you," urged the girl.

Green waited a moment before cautiously peering around the tree trunk. The man had disappeared as quietly as he had come, and Mary Sturtevant was just passing back into the house through the window.

"Gee!" muttered Green. "I've got the dope *now*. I'm wastin' time here—me for the tree!"

He started off at a run.

By going north along the road on which the Prentice estate was located, Forrester could reach the western end of Jasper lane. He began his journey at a brisk pace. The night was clear but dark, the white strip of roadway being barely distinguishable. Forrester knew the way well, however, and arrived at the lane without further adventure than the keeping out of the way of occasional motors that flashed by. As the headlights of these cars threw his figure into prominence against the background of the night he thought with amusement of the wonder of

the occupants at seeing a hatless man in evening clothes straying along a deserted road.

Forrester did not make any effort to conceal himself as he approached the great oak. Both the detectives and the emissaries of the "Friends of the Poor" would be expecting him. For the time being at least he had nothing to fear, and it would be well for all those who might be watching to know definitely when the package was deposited.

He paused for a moment in front of the tree and listened. Nothing was to be seen, and there was no sound save the distant wail of a locomotive whistle and the faint rustling of leaves overhead. Cautiously picking his way through the darkness so as not to disturb the detectives' strings if they were in place, Forrester reached the tree, found the opening and placed the package in it. Then he carefully returned to the road and walked noisily along it for a short distance. Suddenly he leaped aside and paused. When he was assured that everything remained quiet he crept silently back in the direction of the tree, but on the opposite side of the road, and close to the woods. He had slightly lost his bearings during these maneuvers in the darkness, and had difficulty in again locating the tree. By glancing toward the sky from time to time he finally saw the huge bulk of the oak against the stars. Feeling around for an opening in the underbrush directly opposite the tree, Forrester moved back a little way from the road and waited.

As the minutes slipped by without incident, Forrester grew restless. The necessity of remaining absolutely motionless to prevent making any noise cramped his muscles, and the continued silence in the impenetrable darkness grated upon his nerves. He had expected action of some kind, yet it almost seemed now as if he were doomed to disappointment. He remembered that on other occasions detectives had waited there throughout the night, only to discover in the morning that their quarry had come and gone. Was this about to happen once more? Had the package over which he and the detectives were watching already been removed? It hardly seemed possible, in view of the precautions which the detectives had taken. He had a feeling, too, that somewhere in that silent darkness, others beside the detectives and himself were concealed. He did not hear a sound, however, outside of the occasional stirring of the leaves as a gentle breeze passed through the woods.

Suddenly, far down the lane, Forrester heard a slight creak that seemed to him like the application of the brake on an automobile. Listening intently, he felt sure that he could also hear the soft purr of an idling engine. At last they must be coming!

Strain his ears as he might, however, Forrester could detect no other sound.

If anyone were approaching the tree it was with a catlike tread that no human ear could hear.

Then, in a moment, everything changed. There was a short, sharp exclamation, followed by stifled oaths and the rush of feet. Forrester could tell from the rustling of leaves on the ground and the cracking of twigs that a struggle was taking place. He longed to rush forward and help, yet reason told him that it was better to leave the matter in the hands of the detectives until they were sure of their men. The next moment the darkness was scattered by two electric pocket lamps and Forrester recognized Cahill and O'Connor standing halfway between the road and the tree, each with a man in his grasp.

Forrester darted across the road, but at the same moment there came a blinding flash of light that blotted out everything about him. This was followed by shouts and oaths and several pistol shots. The flash had lasted for only a second, but the intensity of the light, followed by utter darkness, left Forrester practically blinded, and he stood helpless in the road.

He did not know which way to turn, or what had happened, until an electric pocket lamp once more spread its rays across the road. Forrester then saw that the man who held it remained alone in front of the tree, and he hurried over to join him.

"What happened?" cried Forrester.

"That's what I'd like to know," growled the man, who proved to be Cahill.

Just then another pocket lamp flashed out. It was held by O'Connor, who now approached from the roadway and joined them.

"No use," groaned O'Connor, "they got away. I stood no chance chasin' an automobile."

"What do you know about that?" muttered Cahill. "Those Dagos right in our hands! Then that flash went off and blinded us, and piff—they were gone!"

"That'll make some picture!" came a gleeful exclamation, and Humphrey appeared within the circle of light cast by the pocket lamps.

"Picture, hell!" bellowed Cahill. "They got away!"

Humphrey stared around with a bewildered air. "Why," he exclaimed, "when you turned on your lights I thought you had them fast. I decided that was the time to set off my flash light and shoot a picture of you in the very act of capturing your prisoners."

"Bright idea, young fellow," snorted Cahill, "but in one second you killed a whole year's detective work!"

At this moment a wheezing sound was heard in the road. All turned in that direction and saw Green come staggering up, out of breath and almost speechless

with his exertions.

"Did—you—get—him?" gasped Green, with an effort.

"Don't see any strangers hanging around, do you?" sneered Cahill.

"Well—the—man—started—for—the tree," declared Green, "and I—followed him." He gave a gulp and partly recovered his breath. "Just as I turned in—from the main road—down here—I heard the rumpus—and I thought you had got the man."

"THE man?" exclaimed Cahill. "What are you talking about?"

"Why—I was keepin' watch at a house—up the road here—for Mr. Forrester. I heard a man arrangin' to come down to the tree—to get the package."

"Well, he split into *two* by the time he got here," sneered Cahill. "You've been looking through last year's almanac, partner."

Forrester took the puffing Green by the arm and pushed him to one side. "If you know anything," he whispered, "keep it to yourself. We'll talk it over later."

"Look here," said O'Connor, suddenly, turning to Humphrey, "What you goin' to do with that picture you took?"

"Put it in the paper tomorrow," answered Humphrey, triumphantly. "A big headline across the top will read: 'Friends of the Poor' caught while trying to collect their secret toll."

"Don't do it!" commanded O'Connor. "They ain't caught yet. Keep it quiet about that picture. Give the negative to us. We'll have the faces enlarged. Perhaps we can pick up these Dagos from their photos."

"I get you," assented Humphrey. "I see I spoiled the game all right; and I'll do all I can to help you. I'll have that negative over at the detective bureau first thing in the morning."

"O'Connor don't talk much," observed Cahill, "but when he does, he says something. You get that picture to us quick, young fellow, and we'll close this thing up with a bang! There's no question about who the 'Friends of the Poor' are now."

"Did those fellows get my package?" inquired Forrester.

"Not on your life!" returned Cahill. "They never got near enough to the tree for that."

"Then," said Forrester, turning to Green, "you would better get that package and we'll take it back with us. It may come in handy some other time."

Green went to the tree and inserted his hand in the opening. He felt carefully around, then withdrew his arm and turned to face the others. In the dim light of the pocket lamps they saw that his eyes were staring wildly.

"*It's gone!*" he cried.

CHAPTER XIII—A PUZZLING WARNING

"Whatever happened to you last night, Son?" exclaimed Mrs. Forrester.

Forrester had just strolled into the dining room, late for the one o'clock Sunday dinner. The excitement of the incident at the tree, together with the strange occurrence related to him by Green, had caused Forrester a sleepless night. It was nearly dawn when he had finally fallen asleep and in his state of nervous and physical exhaustion he had not again awakened until just in time to dress for dinner.

"It seems to me, Bob," observed Josephine, "that of late it has become quite an event when you honor us with your company."

"You apparently forget," returned Forrester, testily, as he sat down, "that I have had something more important on my mind this last week than regular attendance at meals and dances."

"No, Bob," smiled Josephine, "I had not overlooked the great event that has come into your life during the past week. It is a well-known fact that a man in love usually loses his appetite. I have not told Mother before, but the last time I saw you, you were engaged in an earnest conversation with Miss Sturtevant. When you disappeared so completely I concluded that she had probably sent you forth to tilt with windmills."

"I gather from your words, young lady," retorted Forrester, "that you look upon me as a modern combination of Don Juan and Don Quixote. Let me inform you that I am neither of these—but simply a re-incarnation of M. Lecoq, the great detective."

"This repartee bewilders me and does not answer my question," declared Mrs. Forrester. "We missed you right after dinner last night, Bob, and Diana asked for you several times. She said that she had not had one dance with you—not even

a word except a formal 'good-evening' when you arrived."

"If you have forgotten, Mother, at least Josephine must remember that last night was the night on which I was to place that extortion money in the big oak in Jasper lane."

"Good gracious!" cried Mrs. Forrester. "You assured me, Bob, that you had fixed that matter up and that there was nothing for us to worry about. Did you pay them the money they asked for?"

"I put a package in the tree last night as instructed," returned Forrester, evasively. "There is absolutely nothing for you to worry about, Mother."

"I hope you gave them all they asked for, Son, and have not trifled with them. You know what happened to dear Mr. Nevins, and others who opposed them."

"It's all fixed up, Mother. Just go on with your dinner and forget about it. By the way, have you seen the Nevins since the funeral?"

"No, but I talked with Mrs. Nevins over the telephone yesterday," explained Mrs. Forrester. "They will not open their house here this summer. Just now they plan to travel for a while, and then stay at their place near Pittsfield, in the Berkshires, until fall."

"I must try to see Charlie before he leaves," said Forrester. "So many things have happened in the last few days that the time has seemed like weeks instead of days."

"Incidentally, Bob," informed Josephine, a moment later, "you will be interested to know that you have been quite a hero during the past week because of that demand made upon you. It seemed as if every group I approached last evening was discussing it, and when your continued absence was discovered, it caused considerable concern."

"You should have assured them," returned Forrester, "that I had a trusty body-guard."

"Oh, yes," exclaimed Josephine, "William was telling me about that man, Green. I must get a look at him. I don't know that I ever saw a real live detective before."

"Any time you want to peek through the window, Josephine, you will probably see him," replied Forrester, laughing. "He has instructions to hang around outside the house and keep his eyes open."

"But of course you will let him go, now that everything is settled," asserted Mrs. Forrester.

"Yes, of course," returned Forrester, "but I thought it might be just as well if he stayed around for a few days longer." Then he added, diplomatically, "It is a

great protection against burglars and tramps to have a detective near the house."

Dinner over, Forrester joined Green in the pergola. Green had selected this spot as his permanent station because it formed a splendid vantage ground from which he could keep an eye on the principal living rooms of the house, and have both the north and south entrance gates under his observation as well.

Green had been stunned when he learned of the actual appearance of the Italians at the tree on Saturday night. While he frankly confessed that an explanation was beyond him, he refused to believe that the city detectives were correct in their surmises. He stoutly maintained that the real "Friends of the Poor" were undiscovered, and cited the mysterious disappearance of the dummy package as proof of this claim. Forrester was inclined to agree with him, and before parting for the night the two men had decided to go ahead with their investigations, independently of the police. Green, after the conversation he had overheard, was in thorough accord with Forrester in the conviction that Miss Sturtevant was in some way the key to the problem.

After conferring with Green along these lines for some time, Forrester left the detective to watch the house, and taking his roadster, started out to visit the girl.

To reach the house which Mary Sturtevant had rented it was necessary for Forrester to pass through Jasper lane. He stopped his car in front of the tree and made a careful examination of the ground in every direction. From the trampled condition of the undergrowth, and some withered leaves which had been burned by the flashlight, Forrester was able to locate the spot across the road where Humphrey had been concealed. The wooden pegs which the detectives had placed in the ground near the tree were still there, though the strings had been broken off and scattered during the struggle. He found no other indications of anyone having been at the tree. How the package had been removed without discovery was a baffling puzzle. Standing there in the brilliant daylight, Forrester felt as though the whole thing were a nightmare. It was hard to associate the stories of weird voices, rattling chains and the notes of a ghostly bell with this peaceful woodland spot. The flaming hand which Green still maintained he had actually seen was too fantastic for credence. Forrester re-entered his car, more than a little depressed with the hopelessness of the situation, and continued his journey.

Miss Sturtevant and her companion, Mrs. Morris, were sitting on the front porch when Forrester arrived. The girl was frankly pleased to see him, rising from her chair and coming part way down the steps as he approached.

Under the spell of her presence Forrester's recent depression took flight.

The startling happenings of the past week seemed like mere phantasmagoria to him as he dropped into the chair she indicated. He settled back with a sigh of relief that did not escape the girl. Her eyes softened as she looked at him and had Forrester turned at that moment he would have been greatly encouraged by the flush which stole over her cheeks when she perceived his attitude toward her.

"You are tired," she observed, sympathetically. "It has been a great strain. I am sorry the case remains unsolved."

Forrester glanced around sharply, recalling Green's information about the promised telephone message.

"You have heard what happened last night?" he queried.

Miss Sturtevant stiffened perceptibly, and the guarded nature of her reply was evident.

"Your dejected attitude tells a plain story, Mr. Forrester. Whatever happened at the oak, I am sure you are still perplexed."

"I am," admitted Forrester, shortly.

"I have heard, Mr. Forrester, that you are making a determined effort to unmask these people; that you have taken grave risks which should have been assumed by others more experienced. Do you think you are wise?"

"What do *you* think I should do?" asked Forrester.

"Go away!" she answered, quickly, emphatically.

"Until when?"

"Until—," she paused a moment, "until the police have cleared this matter up."

"Permanent banishment!" laughed Forrester. But immediately his face grew grave. Why did she want him to go away? Did she really feel a personal interest in him, and desire to save him from the retribution she knew was sure to come, or had he actually become a menace to the rogues who apparently held her allegiance? Did this advice come from her heart, or had she been instructed to warn him? Forrester was confused in a tangle of hopes, doubts and conjectures. Then a passionate longing for the girl surged within him. In spite of his suspicions and the enigmatic occurrences in which she was a prominent figure, he knew that he felt a restfulness and enjoyment in her company that was inexplicable. Always when he was near her it seemed as if he had reached the end of a difficult journey. Despite their short acquaintance Forrester knew that he was deeply and irretrievably in love. With his usual impulsiveness he swung his chair to face hers and burst out:

"Mary, I love you!"

The girl regarded him steadily, a serious, searching look in her brown eyes

that held Forrester fascinated and for the moment incapable of further speech. Then she broke the spell.

"How can you," she asked, "in so short a time?"

"Mary, I am old enough to know my mind and heart. I have danced and dined and flirted with the women of two continents without a desire for any one of them. But from the moment I saw you, I wanted you—just you. Sometimes love may grow as the result of long friendship or close association; but when a man meets his real mate he knows it—instantly."

"Robert," said the girl, timidly, and Forrester thrilled at the sound of this name on her lips for the first time. It showed at least a partial victory. "The fate that has so strangely thrown us together still holds us in its hands. Both of us are entangled in the meshes of a malignant force and until such time as fate relinquishes its present hold upon us I cannot give you the answer you are seeking."

This admission from Mary Sturtevant startled Forrester. Yet its greatest effect upon him was to further strengthen his resolve to pull her back from the black pit of disaster before it was too late.

"I have known from the first that some hidden influence controlled you," imparted Forrester. "It is that knowledge which impelled me to disclose my feelings toward you so soon. I want to save you from these people who are dragging you down. I want to save you from yourself. If you will marry me, now, we can go away and leave this hideous nightmare behind."

As Forrester made this statement a peculiar expression drifted over the girl's face. Then her eyes sparkled as she extended her hand and laid it caressingly upon one of his which grasped the arm of her chair.

"Do you think that I am involved in this affair of the 'Friends of the Poor'—that I have guilty knowledge of it?" she asked.

"I have suspected it," assented Forrester. "Many of your actions have implicated you seriously. You must remember," he added, "that I have been playing the detective myself."

"And you still want to marry me?" she queried.

"Yes; I want you more every minute I know you."

"Then, I know you really love me," she murmured. "But, Robert—I cannot draw back now. If you will wait until this thing reaches its inevitable end—and you still feel that you want me—then I will answer you."

Mary Sturtevant rose to her feet and Forrester knew that she was dismissing him. Her companion had long since discreetly disappeared and the dusk of approaching evening already threw the porch into shadow. Realizing that they

were free from observation, and acting on a sudden impulse, Forrester took the girl in his arms and held her close to him. She neither resisted nor responded, but her soft, warm body aroused in Forrester a feeling of reckless determination to solve the mystery quickly and at any cost. Releasing her, he left without a word, dashing down the steps and across the drive to his car.

CHAPTER XIV—THE INTRUDERS

Several days passed without incident, and so far as Green or Forrester were concerned, no progress had been made. Each day Green went to his post in the pergola and lolled in an easy chair while consuming Forrester's cigars at an alarming rate. With the lake rippling at his feet, birds calling in the trees around him, and gentle breezes tempering the increasing heat of advancing summer, Green was in paradise. The monotonous hours of his watch were relieved by occasional visits from William, the chauffeur, and flirtations with the maids.

Forrester, on the other hand, existed in a state of feverish but profitless activity. He secured several books on criminology and studied them conscientiously in the quiet of the library; he spent hours in the woods watching the tree or spying upon the negress, Lucy. He could not free himself from the idea that this eerie colored woman was in some way connected with the mystery, although Green scoffed at its possibility.

"You're wastin' time on that Jamaica nigger woman," counseled Green. "That type can't stand prosperity. If she had her fingers on any o' them dollars, she wouldn't be rustin' away in the woods. I'd risk a bet that she's just hidin' from her past."

Once Forrester called on Mary Sturtevant during this quiescent interval, and twice met her at social functions to which both had been invited. On these latter occasions the girl had eluded all his efforts to be alone with her. In fact, Forrester had a feeling that she purposely avoided any appearance of more than a mere acquaintance with him.

He was not deceived by these eventless days. Surmising that the "Friends of the Poor" were holding off some act of retaliation merely to lull him into a sense of false security and thus take him off his guard, Forrester maintained a constant

watchfulness of everything about him. This caution at times may have made him appear churlish; in such instances as a refusal to accept assistance from passing motorists when he had trouble with his car on the road.

Then, on Saturday, one week after the enigmatical happenings at the oak tree, the case once more presented itself with weird and baffling additions. Toward noon, Humphrey telephoned that he had important information and would come out to "Woodmere" after business hours. Forrester extended him an invitation to dinner, coupled with an admonition against mentioning a word regarding the matter before his mother and sister. So it was not until after dinner, when Forrester had summoned Green and the three men had shut themselves in the library, that Humphrey disclosed his startling information.

Forrester placed cigars on the library table, inviting the others to help themselves, while he filled and lighted his pipe. "Now," he said, "what is it?"

"The detectives have caught the Italians!" divulged Humphrey.

"Always them *Italians*," sneered Green. "Well, what then?"

"Yes," requested Forrester, "tell us the whole story—right from the start."

"It begins with the photo I made last Saturday," began Humphrey. "I took the negative and a print to the detective bureau as I promised, and turned them over to Cahill and O'Connor. It was a wonder, too; take it from me! At the moment the flash went off both the detectives and the two Italians looked straight at the camera. O'Connor immediately spotted one of the men as Dominick Campanelli, a suspect the police have taken in half a dozen times but never could actually fasten anything on. That picture of mine settled him! I showed the detective bureau this time that it was worth while letting reporters on the inside of their cases."

"Leave out the interpolations," interrupted Forrester. "Green and I want the facts that concern us."

"Oh, you gotta let them reporters blow off a little steam," declared Green.

Humphrey glared at Green. "You detectives haven't any extra steam to blow off," he retorted. "Well, as I was about to say, Cahill and O'Connor started out to hunt for those two men in the photo. They picked up Campanelli out in Hammond on Thursday. He had a man with him named Luigi Licansi, who turned out to be the man that drove their car. The detectives kept this capture quiet until, on Friday, along in the afternoon, they found the other man in the picture—Frank Tanuzzio—hanging around the very garage where the car with the bullet holes was discovered. Cahill considered that a conclusive piece of evidence.

"At the detective bureau the men were sullen and refused to talk. The detectives put them through the third-degree all night without results. This morning the men were taken to the office of the State's Attorney. When he informed them

that they were to be charged with being members of the 'Friends of the Poor,' and would probably pay the penalty for the murders committed by that band of money-gougers, these Italians were scared stiff and immediately offered to make a full confession."

"You mean," exclaimed Forrester, "that these men were not really the 'Friends of the Poor,' as the detectives had supposed?"

"I should say not!" returned Humphrey. "Just low-brow *intruders*—common thieves. It was simply a case of one crook trying to steal from another. And I want to tell you that when the facts are made public they'll be mighty lucky to be safe in jail."

"What've I been tellin' you, Mr. Forrester," cried Green. "Thank God, them *Italians* will be off our minds now."

"Yes," admitted Humphrey, "you guessed right for once, Green. I've seen their signed confession. I telephoned here as soon as I left the Criminal Court building."

"What did they say in the confession?" questioned Forrester.

"Of course, I can't remember the exact words, but the facts are about like this: Reading in the newspapers that people were placing large sums of money in that oak tree, they figured that it would be easy to slip up some night and steal the money before the other fellows could get it. It was just a question of knowing what night the money would be there. When they heard of your case, Mr. Forrester, these Italians decided that their opportunity had come and watched you night and day to find out when you placed the money in the tree. That *was* their car which followed you through the fog that night. Reading my article, stating that you intended placing the money in the tree last Saturday, they made sure of the time by telephoning you Friday night."

"One telephone call accounted for," murmured Forrester.

"I frustrated the detectives' capture," continued Humphrey, "by setting off the flashlight for my photo. It startled and blinded the detectives, so they tell me, allowing these fellows an opportunity to get away."

"Did they get my dummy package?" inquired Forrester.

"I think not," replied Humphrey. "The Italians claim not to have taken anything from the tree at any time."

Forrester stretched out his feet before him, thrust his hands deep into his trousers pockets and smiled at the two men.

"That settles all doubt about the 'Friends of the Poor,'" he said. "They not only remain unknown, but probably secured my dummy package and know that I have fooled them. Gentlemen, kindly omit flowers."

"Ah! but here's the biggest surprise of all," exclaimed Humphrey, as he jumped out of his chair, and taking a large envelope from the table where he had laid it on entering the library, drew forth a photograph.

Green and Forrester also rose and approached the library table while Humphrey was arranging the photograph where the lamplight would fall full upon it.

"A camera is a wonderful thing," commented Humphrey. "Astronomers discover stars with it that are not visible to the eye, even through a powerful telescope; and spiritualists claim to have secured photos of specters or ghosts or whatever they call the things that visit them. I can believe it after seeing this photo."

"You ain't got a picture o' them ghosts, have you?" queried Green, memories of a certain gruesome night only too clearly recalled.

"Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't," returned Humphrey, non-committally, but obviously amused at Green's apprehension. "*That's* what I'm going to let you folks decide. There!" he added, placing a finger on the photograph as the others bent over it. "See that black spot back of the tree? That is the shadow thrown by the tree trunk when my flashlight went off. Naturally, anything in that shadow would not photograph well. If you look carefully, however, you can make out what appears to be a man standing a short distance back of the tree. It looks like a silhouette, and may be only my imagination. That is why I want your opinions."

First Forrester and then Green studied the photograph.

"Well?" inquired Humphrey, at length.

"I believe you are right," acceded Forrester. "A man was evidently hiding behind the oak while we were there."

"I can go you one better!" asserted Green, positively. "Remember, Mr. Forrester, the man's silhouette I saw on the Prentices' lawn that night—the man who—"

"Yes—yes," interrupted Forrester, quickly, fearing that Green was about to mention the girl before Humphrey.

"*That looks like the same silhouette!*"

"And now," cried Humphrey, "I want to show you something that is even more puzzling. Do you happen to have a magnifying glass, Mr. Forrester?"

"Yes," said Forrester, opening the drawer in the table and taking out a large reading glass.

"Hold the glass over the opening in the tree," instructed Humphrey. "Do you see anything?"

Forrester adjusted the glass to different distances, while he examined this part of the photograph.

"Yes," he agreed, after a time, "there seems to be a thin black object inside the opening. It may be my package."

"No," protested Humphrey. "This looks like a black rod with a bright or white spot near the end. Can you make it out, now that I have explained it?"

"Yes," acknowledged Forrester, "but I cannot even make a guess at what it can be."

"I'll bet it's a hand!" groaned Green. "I've seen it before!"

CHAPTER XV—THE MASK OF DEATH

Humphrey's visit marked a turning point in the mysterious case of the "Friends of the Poor." His famous photograph was published in the *Times* and created a considerable stir. Fortunately, in the newspaper reproduction only the prominent features were discernible, and as at Forrester's request the reporter had omitted any reference to the perplexing details which he had discovered, these possible clues remained unknown to the police and public. All the newspapers showed a tendency to ridicule and censure the police for their misdirected activity, which aroused the department to redoubled efforts in the solution of the case. This was further accentuated by pressure brought to bear upon the chief of police, and even the mayor himself, by various civic associations which had become alarmed at the inability of the police to protect wealthy citizens from this terrible menace.

A small army of detectives was assigned to the case, and as Green expressed it, "You can't turn a corner without steppin' on some bull's toes." Police activity was largely expended in the form of espionage upon persons who had in any way been connected with the case, and careful investigation of all people who lived in the vicinity of the oak tree. Green reported to Forrester that a man who was unquestionably a detective was keeping the Forrester estate under surveillance, and Forrester discovered that a detective was steadily on guard at the tree.

That the "Friends of the Poor" were undaunted by this display of police action, and were prepared to flaunt their power in the very faces of the police, was shown by the fact that one morning the detective who had been on watch at the tree the night before was found dead. The police surgeon stated it to be a clear case of asphyxiation, although how such a thing had been accomplished in the open air he was not prepared to say. This tragedy, however, terminated all efforts of the police to keep an open watch over the tree, for it was evident that the

mysterious force which was at work could not be reached in this way.

On the same day Green had come to Forrester in a state of great dejection. The detective had found one of the familiar wrapping paper notes pinned to his chair in the pergola, which read:

To Detective Green and Robert Forrester:

You have but ten days to live.

Friends of the Poor.

Following the death of the detective at the tree, the negress, Lucy, was arrested on suspicion, and Forrester learned from the newspapers that the police had thoroughly ransacked her home in a search for incriminating evidence, but without results. Forrester was impressed, when he read this report, by the fact that Lucy persistently refused to give any information regarding herself. As had been the situation at the time of the reputed murder of her husband, there was absolutely no evidence against her, and the police were forced to release her. To Forrester, however, she still held her position as a possible though puzzling element in the case.

Forrester also read with indignation that detectives had visited Mary Sturtevant, closely questioning everyone in her household. Not a breath of suspicion was raised against her as a result of this investigation, which pleased Forrester, though it still further bewildered him in his surmises regarding the girl. What chance had he in unearthing something which a direct police investigation could not disclose? Forrester had not seen Mary Sturtevant for some days, but this incident impelled him to call on her, so early in the evening he took his roadster and drove over to the girl's house.

Mary Sturtevant's apparent coldness toward him at their recent meetings had worried Forrester, and he was greatly relieved when her greeting was more cordial than ever and she showed every indication of pleasure at seeing him.

"Robert," she said, as he drew his chair close to hers and sat down, "I had about come to the conclusion that you had taken my advice and gone away."

"You know," replied Forrester, "that I will not leave here until this case is solved—unless you promise to go with me."

"That is impossible," she returned. "I am in no danger—not even from the police," and she glanced at him with one of her old mischievous smiles. Then added, gravely, "But you are risking your life every day that you remain here."

"Mary," protested Forrester, "your attitude in this matter is inexplicable. Won't you confide in me and let me help you?"

"Some day, Robert," she declared, earnestly, "I shall probably be able to explain to you; but please for the present, say no more about it."

While absolutely certain of his own feelings toward her, Forrester was still doubtful about her attitude toward him. The fact that she continued to use his given name when they were alone encouraged him. Beyond that, however, she gave little or no evidence of how she felt toward him. Forrester was unwilling, therefore, to risk offending her by further talk upon a subject which she so urgently requested him to drop. He turned the conversation to other matters in which they were mutually interested.

At ten o'clock Forrester rose to go, and the girl accompanied him to the foot of the steps. There she held out her hand and as he took it, she said, pleadingly, "Please, Robert, won't you go away for a little while?"

Forrester leaned over and touched his lips to her hand.

"No," he returned shortly, and jumped into his car.

As he drove along Jasper lane Forrester was startled to hear a sharp report behind him. It echoed through the still woods and for a moment he thought that someone had fired a shot at him, but the immediate jarring of his car signified that one of the rear tires had blown out. He stopped the car, shut off the engine, and after adjusting the spotlight so that he could see to work, threw his coat into the car and started the job of changing tires.

He had nearly completed the task when he was suddenly seized in a strong grip and something placed over his face!

Though taken at a disadvantage, and aware, from the peculiar odor which assailed his nostrils, that his opponent was endeavoring to render him unconscious by some sort of gas or drug, Forrester did not give up hope but fought back courageously. His arms had been pinioned at his sides, however, and he found it impossible to do more than struggle in the grasp of his attacker. Realizing that he must soon lose consciousness, Forrester made a supreme effort and succeeded in wrenching his arms free. His first thought being to get air, he grasped at the object over his face in an effort to pull it away. It was too late, for he already felt faint and weak and could not exert the necessary strength.

Then he dimly heard several explosions like pistol shots and everything became blank.

Forrester slowly opened his eyes and stared straight ahead for a minute or two, trying to recollect what had happened and where he was. He was in bed, but the room, so far as he could see in the dim light of a distant, shaded lamp, was unfamiliar.

"Oh, Robert," cried a voice, "are you all right? How do you feel? Speak to me!"

Languidly he turned his head and recognized Mary Sturtevant sitting by the bedside. Then he discovered that one of his hands was held tightly in both of hers.

"What has happened?" he queried, weakly.

"You met with an accident," she answered. "The doctor said we got there just in time. You must not talk about it now, or ask any questions."

She dropped his hand, and jumping up, hurried across the room. In a moment she returned with a glass, and holding his head up with one hand, placed the glass at his lips.

"Drink this," she ordered.

Forrester drank a little from the glass and then she let his head drop gently back on the pillow and sat down beside him. He watched her dreamily for a moment or two, finally dropping off to sleep.

When Forrester again awoke the bright morning sun was streaming in through a window at the foot of his bed. The first thing he saw was the big colored man, Joshua, rocking in a chair near the window and crooning to himself. Forrester tried to sit up, but found that he was very weak. His effort attracted the attention of the negro.

"Yo' jes' lie still, Boss. Dem's mah orders."

"Hello, Joshua!" said Forrester, and was surprised at the feebleness of his voice when he tried to speak. "What are you doing here?"

"Ah belong heah, Boss. Dis am Mistah Bradbury's house."

Forrester was puzzled. He knew that "Mr. Bradbury's house" was where Mary Sturtevant lived.

"How did I get here, Joshua?" he inquired.

"Ah guess de hants done got yo', Boss. Mah Missey an' me done fine yo' layin' in de road in front of dat tree wif a rubber t'ing in yo' han'."

"A rubber thing?" exclaimed Forrester. "What do you mean?"

"Ah dunno what it is, Boss."

"Where is it now?" asked Forrester.

"We-all done got it downstairs, Boss. Ah'll get it and show yo'."

Joshua left the room. He returned presently with a large, circular piece of rubber which he placed in Forrester's hands. Forrester examined it carefully. He found that it was flexible, somewhat oval in form, and concave. At the back a piece of light rubber tubing, about one foot in length, was attached. Forrester placed the rubber over his face for a moment and found that its form made it fit like a mask. He withdrew it hastily when he heard an exclamation at his side. It

was Mary Sturtevant, and as Forrester glanced up he saw her looking at him with startled eyes.

"Joshua!" she cried, turning to the negro, "how did Mr. Forrester get that?"

"Ah done brung it to him, mam."

The girl seized the piece of rubber from Forrester and handing it to Joshua, directed, "Take it away instantly, Joshua. Put it in my room."

"Yassum!" and Joshua darted out of the room, mumbling to himself.

The events of the night came back to Forrester quite clearly now.

"Was that the thing my assailant used on me last night?" he asked, looking up at the girl.

"Yes," she returned, "but you mustn't talk about it."

"But I want to talk about it," he exclaimed. "And I want it for evidence!"

"Robert," she said seriously, "you must not tell a soul about what happened last night, or refer to that piece of rubber. It is absolutely vital that you do this for me. Please promise."

"I'll consider it," he said, "if you will tell me the whole story of what happened."

"I am willing to tell you that," she returned, "but first you must have your breakfast. I can tell you the story while you are eating. It is very short."

She left the room, returning in a few minutes with a tray. After assisting Forrester to sit up in bed, and arranging the pillows at his back, she placed the tray in his lap. As he ate, she explained to him what had happened.

"After you left, I stood on the steps listening to the hum of your engine as you drove away. I was worried, Robert, to think of your recklessness in driving around alone at night under the present circumstances. Suddenly, I heard a report like a pistol shot, and as I could no longer hear the sound of your engine, I feared that something had happened to you.

"Calling Joshua, we ran along the road in the direction you had taken. We soon saw the lights of your car, and I could see that two men were struggling in the road. I knew that one of them must be you. I have always carried my little automatic with me since I came to live in this lonely neighborhood. Taking it out, I fired several shots in the air as I ran. That frightened the man who was attacking you and he fled.

"Joshua carried you back to the house, and I telephoned for a doctor. The doctor said that an attempt had been made to asphyxiate you. If we had been a minute or two later he could not have saved you."

"My God!" cried Forrester, receiving a shocking revelation. "The 'Friends of the Poor'! That is how their victims have been killed! How did you get that mask

of death, Mary?"

"You had seized it with a deathlike grip. The doctor could hardly get it out of your hands. When the man fled he had to break the tubing to carry the rest of the apparatus away."

"What a wonderful piece of evidence!" exclaimed Forrester.

"Yes," admitted the girl, "but against whom will you use it?"

CHAPTER XVI—THE FATAL DANCE

Forrester's splendid health, and the prompt treatment he had received, quickly put him on his feet. The second day after his adventure he had sufficiently recovered to drive home in his car. This had been placed in the Bradbury barn by Joshua, who also completed the exchange of tires, which had been interrupted.

The effect of this incident upon his family worried Forrester. It would drive his mother into a state of hysterical fear that could not fail to seriously impede his investigations. When he mentioned this phase of his accident to Mary Sturtevant, however, he found that the clever and resourceful girl had foreseen and provided against such an occurrence.

Green had been summoned shortly after Forrester was brought to the house, the attack explained and instructions given to inform Forrester's family that a business proposition had called him away unexpectedly for a few days.

"No one outside of Mr. Green and my servants will ever know of this incident," Mary Sturtevant informed Forrester, "if *you* remain silent. And for my sake I know that you will."

Forrester promised, though strange doubts and misgivings battled with his affection for the girl. But of what use was love, he reflected, if it could not stand the fire and acid tests of life's problematical moments. That the girl loved him he did not question now. It was only this dark and fearsome mystery which continued to hold them apart.

Back home again, Forrester bathed and changed his clothes; then, after looking up his mother and sister and accounting for his absence in a matter of fact manner, he sought Green at his station in the pergola.

"Narrow escape, Mr. Forrester," commented Green, as Forrester shook hands with him and sat down. "Funny how that Miss Sturtevant happened to be so

handy. What do you say?"

"I came out to have a talk with you, Green, along that line," replied Forrester. "I have found some of your ideas right to the point. In other ways you don't seem to get anywhere. Now, for example, your surmise about the Italians was correct. Your theory that Lucy is not connected with these people appears to be confirmed by the investigations of the police. The position you take that the 'Friends of the Poor' are located in the vicinity of the tree grows stronger every day. But—you don't seem able to point your finger at a single person or thing that will give us a solid basis upon which to work. That is what I want now—a real suggestion that I can follow up, and through which I may hope to form some definite conclusion or take positive action. We must have action, Green; quick action."

"I have given you a valuable hint, Mr. Forrester, but you turned it down. What about them two people I saw on Prentice's lawn—what about the man who visited Miss Sturtevant and then hid himself behind the tree and pulled out your package while the excitement was on—what about 'em, eh? Why, damn it all!" Green exclaimed, jumping to his feet and pounding a big fist on the palm of his open hand, "just let me get out of here and I'll show you somethin'. How can I get anywhere, just sittin' here communin' with the birds. If you won't let me do it, then get out yourself and find that man. Between him and the girl you got two startin' points that'll bag the whole crew."

Forrester sat in silence after this outburst. Green was right! The detective *had* pointed an accusing finger at Mary Sturtevant. He *had* given Forrester positive information that she knew something definite about the "Friends of the Poor," and yet, blinded by his infatuation, Forrester had done nothing.

"All right, Green," agreed Forrester, "I'll work on your suggestions. How can we locate that man, however?"

"If he had a date with her once, he'll have another," asserted Green. "Stick around—that's all. That girl'll solve the case for you yet. Just get her in a tight corner." Then he leaned down to Forrester and added, in a low, confidential tone, "And don't forget that old story about them sireens on the rocks."

A few days later Forrester met Mary Sturtevant at a dance. Though he had promised Green that he would watch her, Forrester had dallied over taking the first step. Now, as he chatted with her and felt the spell she always cast over him, Forrester's whole being revolted at the thought of spying upon her.

"Do you wish any dances?" she inquired, after a time. Forrester's face flushed. Divided between his disturbing reflections and the enchantment of her nearness, he had not thought of reserving any dances. He held out his hand and

she placed her dance card in it.

"You see, you are always late," she chided him. "Five dances are already taken."

"I'll take these three after young Melville," announced Forrester, and wrote his initials on the card.

Forrester had lost his interest in dancing of late, so he held himself in the background until it was time to claim his first dance with Mary Sturtevant. Then he hunted for her everywhere. She was not to be found, and even after the orchestra had begun to play, she did not appear. He saw nothing further of her until time for his second dance, when he suddenly became aware that she was standing by his side.

"You are like the beautiful young woman that the magician passes through his cabinet," exclaimed Forrester.

"Do I appear and disappear so mysteriously as all that?" she laughed, but offered no apology nor explanation.

Then the music began and they swept out on the floor.

Just before the dance ended Forrester noted a stir near the conservatory doors. Though the doors were closed, several people were grouped about them, apparently looking through the glass at something going on within the conservatory. When the music stopped Forrester suggested that they stroll in this direction and ascertain what was taking place. Before they reached the conservatory doors, however, Mr. Melville, their host, appeared at Forrester's side. The man's face was pale and drawn.

"Forrester," said Mr. Melville in a low voice, "we have had an accident in the conservatory. I would appreciate your help. Come around by way of the hall—the doors from this room have been locked."

Mr. Melville turned away toward the hall and Forrester excused himself to Mary Sturtevant. He noticed that her face also had paled.

"I think I know what has happened," she said. "Please let me go with you."

"It might not be agreeable to Mr. Melville," objected Forrester.

"Robert," she whispered, impressively, "you are safe only when I am with you!"

Forrester stared at her in astonishment. There was a beseeching look in her eyes, however, and she held her hands out to him with a pleading gesture which he could not resist.

"Come," he said, briefly, and taking her arm led her across the room and around through the hall into the conservatory. Near its center, hidden from prying eyes among palms and flowering plants, they found Mr. Melville's son stretched

out on a bench. Near by stood the father, while a gray-haired man leaned over the young man. The gray-haired man stood erect at the sound of Forrester's and the girl's approach. Mr. Melville was apparently too much distressed to notice Mary Sturtevant's unbidden presence. He turned to Forrester, informing him simply that the gray-haired man was a doctor.

The deathly pallor on the young man's face told the story. Forrester, however, inquired:

"Dead?"

"Yes," replied the doctor. "Asphyxiated!"

"This is the work of the 'Friends of the Poor,' Forrester," asserted Mr. Melville. "I knew that you were involved and had been carrying on some investigations in the matter. It occurred to me that there might be some clues here of value to you. This is the story:

"About two weeks ago I was ordered by these people to place a certain sum in that oak tree. Naturally, I ignored the demand and notified the police. Since then I have taken every precaution to protect myself against attack. Unable to get at me, it seems obvious that these contemptible wretches have reached me through my son. That, I believe, is a new angle, and shows the extremes to which these people are prepared to go."

"When did this happen, Mr. Melville?" asked Forrester.

"About a half-hour ago, I should say, I saw my son pass into the conservatory with this young lady," and Mr. Melville turned toward Mary Sturtevant for the first time.

Forrester also turned and looked at the girl. She met his gaze steadily.

"Shortly after I came here," she explained, "my next dancing partner entered and claimed me. I left young Mr. Melville sitting near that open window over there."

Forrester gave no outward indication of the shock he had received. He clearly remembered that after young Melville's dance the next three dances were his. It was during the first of these, the one she had intimated belonged to someone else, that he had missed the girl. He knew, therefore, that she had lied deliberately, placing it squarely up to him to protect her. "Protect her from what?" thought Forrester. "What was this frightful new development in the mystery?"

"I decided I wanted a smoke," continued Mr. Melville, "and so came into the conservatory. A moment later I found my son on the floor beneath that open window where Miss Sturtevant says she left him. My doctor was among the guests and I summoned him at once—but too late, it seems."

"Any other facts?" asked Forrester, and received another shock when the

doctor handed him a small piece of filmy white fabric.

"I found this beside the body," said the doctor. And added, as Forrester took it, "Note the peculiar odor."

Forrester lifted the fabric to his nose. Instantly he recognized the same pungent, drug-like smell which he had noticed the night he was attacked with the death mask. Examining the filmy bit of cloth, Forrester saw that it was a part of a lady's handkerchief which had been torn in half. In one corner the letter "S" was embroidered. Crumpling the handkerchief in his hand, Forrester pushed it into his waistcoat pocket.

"I believe I can make use of this," he said.

CHAPTER XVII—AT THE DOORSTEP

Crushed beneath the weight of his secret knowledge of Mary Sturtevant's seemingly close connection with the infamous band of extortioners and murderers who were literally terrorizing the city, Forrester fell into a dull routine that held him back from making any progress in the case. That a girl of her delicate refinement, superior intelligence and appealing femininity should be involved with these men whose wanton butcheries were becoming more and more appalling, was a bewildering conundrum. Had anyone simply stated the case to Forrester, he would have ridiculed such a suggestion, yet step by step facts had accumulated rapidly from the day he first met her at the oak tree, culminating in the astounding situation at the dance. The facts were so glaringly against her then that he hardly dared review them.

At the time he put her handkerchief in his pocket he had had two objects in view; to save her from the possible consequences of the discovery of so definite a clue, and later to confront her with it and force a confession. He had a wild idea that once he knew the whole story he could persuade her to go away with him where the baleful hold these men apparently had on her could not follow. Remembering the coincidence of her leaving the room with young Melville, her absence when it was Forrester's turn to dance with her, and her untruthful statement regarding her parting with Melville, Forrester saw clearly that her activities in the affair were more than passive. Everything pointed to her as a daring accomplice.

Forrester decided that as she had repulsed all his efforts to induce her to leave, it would be better for him to stay away from her entirely and let her work out her destiny in her own wilful way. For this reason he refused all invitations, knowing that the wide acquaintance which her letters of introduction had gained

for her would inevitably result in his meeting the girl at practically every place he went.

In spite of loud protests from Josephine, he had declined on this night to attend one of the largest affairs of the season and was sitting in the library with an open book laid face-down across his knee. After a short chat earlier in the evening, Green had retired to his station across the lawn and Forrester attempted to read. The printed words made little or no impression on his perturbed mind and at length he dropped the book. For over two hours he sat staring out through the open French windows, wholly lost in melancholy thoughts.

Suddenly Forrester was conscious that someone was looking at him through the open window. He started up in alarm just as Prentice strolled into the room.

"Hello!" greeted Prentice. "Did I startle you?"

"Rather," answered Forrester, as he dropped back into his chair. "How the deuce did you get in?"

Prentice raised his eyebrows in surprise. "That's a strange question," he declared. "I just walked in, of course. Why do you look so astonished?"

"Well, you see," explained Forrester, "I have a detective stationed out there on the lawn. He is not supposed to allow anyone to slip in like that."

"He has probably dropped off to sleep," laughed Prentice. "Or perhaps, recognizing me, did not think it necessary to interfere. Are your folks at the dance tonight, Bob?"

"Yes, and I'm a little surprised that you are not there."

"A man of my age, Bob, gets surfeited with such affairs. My wife and daughter are there, however, and I promised to run up with the car and bring them home. In passing, it occurred to me that you might like to go along for the ride on such a warm night. It will give me an opportunity to chat with you, too. You know it has been a long time since we had a confidential talk over things."

"I appreciate your thoughtfulness, Prentice, but I had rather not go. I had quite a battle with Josephine over staying at home. If she found that I had actually come as far as the door after all, there would be high jinks. You know, I seem to be settling down terribly lately."

"You've taken too large and unaccustomed a burden on your shoulders, Bob. Better drop that 'Friends of the Poor' matter. Even the police are not getting anywhere."

"I would not have believed a few weeks ago that criminals could go so far without detection," said Forrester.

Prentice glanced around as though he feared being overheard. Then he addressed Forrester in a low tone. "I've changed my mind about the criminal side of

this money drive. I am inclined to believe that it is something more—something of world-wide significance." Then added, in a louder voice, "Well, I must be going on. Good-night, Bob," and he passed out of the window.

Forrester listened to his steps fade away along the terrace and then sat pondering over Green's noninterference with Prentice's approach. It was unusual and peculiar. If the detective were getting careless he was of no further use. Happily, in this instance, it had been only Prentice, but might not one of his enemies come in on him just as easily?

Forrester jumped up and strode across the lawn to the pergola.

"Green!" he called, sharply.

The breeze whispering through the leaves and the splash of tiny wavelets on the beach below were the only sounds Forrester heard. He stepped into the pergola and struck a match. Green was in his chair, but huddled down in a loose and helpless bundle. Forrester shook him without result, though the man's labored breathing showed that he was not dead.

"My God!" cried Forrester. "I believe he has been attacked with the death mask!"

He ran part way to the garage before remembering that the chauffeur was with the car and waiting several miles away to bring Mrs. Forrester and Josephine home. Green must be gotten out of the way before they arrived. Returning to the pergola Forrester placed Green's inert form over his shoulder and carried the detective to his room over the garage. Laying the man carefully on the bed Forrester hurried to the house to telephone.

"Yes," said the doctor, a half-hour later, "I think he will live. We got him just in time. Peculiar thing, Mr. Forrester, how a man can be asphyxiated in the open air—yet this fellow shows every symptom of asphyxia."

"Please don't mention the matter at the house, doctor," requested Forrester. "My mother and sister might be unnecessarily alarmed over it."

"I understand," agreed the doctor. "Mum's the word." Then, turning to William, who had returned and stood in the room, he added, "Are you going to watch him?"

"My wife and I will take turns," replied William.

"Well, if there is a change that does not look favorable, telephone me at once. I'll be back in the morning. Good-night."

During the period of Green's convalescence Forrester emerged from his lethargy, passing to the other extreme. He became restless and uneasy. The doctor advised him against discussing any serious matters with Green, stating that the man had

received a mental as well as a physical shock and that complete recovery could come only through both mental and bodily rest. Forrester remained away from Green, therefore, and finding himself unable to concentrate upon his reading or to focus his thoughts for any length of time, he spent many hours walking along North Shore roads, or discovering new bypaths through the woods.

On one of these occasions he found himself unexpectedly in the rear of Lucy's cottage. As he retained lingering suspicions of the Jamaica colored woman it seemed to Forrester an opportune time to pay her another visit. He walked around the end of the building through the neglected, weed-grown clearing to the door and knocked. No noisy dog greeted him this time, and in the quiet and gloomy woods the place seemed to exhale an atmosphere of insidious mystery. He knocked twice before Lucy opened the door and stood as he remembered her before—silent, distrustfully observant, her peculiar eyes with their oddly drooping lids vaguely suggestive of furtive evil.

"Good afternoon," Forrester greeted her, cheerfully.

"You here again?" and a scowl added to the forbidding aspect of her face.

"Yes; after more news," replied Forrester.

She smiled sneeringly, and Forrester suspected that she was now well aware that he was not connected with a newspaper.

"Well, what sort of news do you want this time?" she snapped.

An inspiration came to Forrester. Perhaps if aroused and angered she might let something slip. "Your opinion of the detectives and police," he answered.

The effect was contrary to his anticipations. She smiled, her face assuming a more cheerful expression than he had ever seen upon it.

"Stupid fools!" she said, briefly, emphasizing in two words of similar import, the depth of her contempt for the representatives of the law. It was a revelation to Forrester, which, more than anything else, influenced some of his subsequent actions.

"What has become of your dog?" he asked. "I missed his friendly reception."

Again her face glowered. "The police shot him," she answered. Then added, "I'm busy; you'd better run along," thus ending the interview abruptly as she had before.

"I think I will," assented Forrester. "Good-bye," and he walked away along the path that led by the tree, conscious that the inscrutable eyes of the negress were following him in speculation.

Forrester returned home, but instead of going directly into the house he strolled across the lawn to the pergola. There he sat down to smoke his pipe, and analyze his impressions of Lucy.

A golden glow from the late afternoon sun hung over the lake. Here and there a sailing craft with sun-gilded sails moved lazily along before the gentle offshore breeze. Birds chirped in the trees at his back, and humming insects hovered around him. Nature breathed peace and restfulness. Only man—and woman—created the turmoil and misery that disturbed life's predestined course. If only human beings would realize that when His work was done all that was needed had been accomplished, and cease their ineffectual attempts to check or alter the inevitable. Yet, while man continued to battle, man must also fight back.

Forrester's reveries were interrupted by the spluttering roar of a motor and he glanced toward the garage. William, seated in the big car, was tuning up his engine, while a man, pale, haggard and unsteady on his feet, trudged across the lawn toward the pergola. Forrester was surprised to see Green up and in action.

The detective entered and sank weakly into a chair near Forrester.

"What's up, Green?" cried Forrester. "I thought you were still confined to your bed."

"I'm goin' back to bed when I get home," replied Green. "I'm goin', Mr. Forrester; I'm through!"

"You mean you are going to leave me?" queried Forrester.

"Yes," assented Green. "I ain't got any wife or children, but I may have some day, and I don't want to disappoint 'em by being bumped off now. Besides, it ain't dignified for a detective to be gassed off while his back is turned—without a chance. If I *have* to die, I'm goin' to die fightin'. So I'm goin', Mr. Forrester. That's final."

"I'm sorry, Green," admitted Forrester, earnestly. "You have become almost like one of the family. You have been a help, too. Some of your ideas have been tip-top, and I may yet profit by hints you have given me. If I do, I'll not forget that bonus I promised you."

"I ain't worryin' about no bonus," returned Green, "but I am sort o' worryin' about you. Do you know what that day was that I nearly got took off?"

"Do you mean what day of the week or month?" inquired Forrester.

"That was the *last day* o' the ten days them guys give us! The only thing that saved you was probably the accidental droppin' in o' that friend o' yours, Prentice, that night. He must've come while they was operatin' on me. They've been gettin' closer and and closer, Mr. Forrester, *but they're at the doorstep now*!"

Green rose to go. Forrester jumped from his chair and shook the man's hand warmly.

"One last piece o' advice," whispered Green. "Watch the girl! Maybe she ain't an actual criminal, but somebody's got a good hold on her. What she knows

about them people would most likely be an eye opener for you."

CHAPTER XVIII—TRIANGULATION

Green's sudden departure, following the enforced and trying separation from Mary Sturtevant, depressed Forrester and left him with a sense of helpless loneliness. He ate dinner that night in a morose silence that called forth several cutting remarks from Josephine. After dinner Forrester sought the seclusion of his room in preference to the library. He wanted to be isolated in order to work out his problem, for Green's words, coupled with the afternoon visit to Lucy, had aroused a determination to end the suspense quickly and finally. He had information that was unknown to the police—information which Green claimed to be vital—and he wanted to decide how to use it to the best advantage.

Green's intimation that Mary Sturtevant might not be an actual criminal gave a different twist to the situation. To conceive of her being a bandit queen had seemed preposterous, yet what other construction could be placed on her actions?

But Forrester also recalled Prentice's vague reference to a new angle in the case—a phase that had hitherto not been thought of. "Something of world-wide significance," were his words. What connection could there be between these local, cold-blooded murders and the rest of the world?

Unexpectedly a great light seemed to come—swift, overwhelming, terrific in its magnitude. Forrester caught his breath.

Red interests!

Why not? Was not the long arm of Bolshevism reaching out everywhere in an effort to destroy nations and bring about a new order of things; could not some master mind have devised, with grim humor, a plan to make so-called Capitalism pay the cost of its own destruction? Forrester's head swam with these thoughts. He saw now that the savage reprisals for refusal to pay could not possibly be the

work of ordinary men. Not even the most desperate criminal would take the risk of so arousing public wrath. On the other hand, would not the wholesale fear aroused among wealthy men by this method be part of Red propaganda?

How many perplexing things seemed to assume a new and easily explained meaning. "Friend of the POOR"—an appropriate title seen from the viewpoint of Red schemers. Lucy, a woman close to the soil, her color a bar to progress, despite her education, would be an easy convert. Forrester was sure the mystery embraced her at some point, yet Green had said she could not resist the temptation of displaying her prosperity. But working fanatically for what she believed a great cause, would explain it. It was possible that she was the one who collected the money and passed it on.

And Mary Sturtevant's part became less blameworthy. Many women of her class had dabbled in amateur Bolshevism. In her case she had, perhaps, gone a little too far, and the Red tentacles were reaching out and seeking to draw her closer. Probably she was making a brave struggle to free herself and hoping at any moment to win.

But at what point could he begin his attack in the light of this new development? There must be something more tangible than theories and fanciful ideas to lay before the police. The responsibility must be laid upon some one, with facts to back up the accusation. Forrester thought of Humphrey and his triangulation theory. It seemed as whimsical as tossing a coin, but Forrester decided to try.

Taking a pad and pencil he first placed a small circle for the oak tree. His recent speculative conclusions led him to draw a small square for Lucy's cottage in its approximate position near the tree. Obviously, Mary Sturtevant was the next most prominent figure in the case, and with a mental measurement of the probable location of the house she occupied, he drew another square. The connecting of these three points with lines astounded Forrester. He saw that he had an obtuse-angled triangle, *with Lucy occupying the controlling point.*

However, there must be one or more additional triangles that would overlap, for Humphrey, in explaining his theory, had said: "At some point the lines will *cross.*"

Forrester mused over this for a time. He could not decide on other points which would be near enough to these to form an overlapping triangle. He tried several ideas without result. His own home was too far away. But how about other victims? Suddenly it came to him. The first and last victims, so far as he knew, were Prentice and Melville, and the homes of these were reasonably near. So Forrester placed a square for each of these men's homes on his sketch. That still left a third point for his triangle. He finally decided to use the tree again for

this point. The lines did not cross, at least in the way he imagined Humphrey had in mind, but they did serve to increase the size of his original triangle and bring it to a perfect form of the isosceles triangle. It was significant, moreover, that the line from Prentice, the *first* victim, led directly through Lucy's cottage to the tree, and he noted with a start that the line from the Melville home, where the girl had been deeply involved, led through Mary Sturtevant's house.

This is the rough sketch as Forrester completed it:

The way to a solution unquestionably led through Lucy and Mary Sturtevant, if there were anything at all to Humphrey's idea. Green pointed at the girl. Forrester's inclinations led him to the negress, and the odd working out of the triangle theory seemed to confirm him in his impressions. Forrester decided to investigate Lucy at once. His reference to the police had amused instead of angered her. She had pithily expressed her disdain of them. Was it not possible that these feelings arose from a sense of victory? In searching her house, the police had failed to find something that she knew was there! Whatever it was, Forrester intended to locate it, and use his information for what it might be worth.

Forrester took an electric pocket lamp from the top of his chiffonier, and a dark muffler from a drawer. These he placed in his pocket. Then he selected a cap of an unobtrusive shade and went down to the laundry. There he cut off a short length of clothesline, wound it around his body and buttoned up his coat.

Unlocking the laundry door, which opened at the southern end of the house, Forrester looked carefully around. He could hear William whistling at his work in the garage, while above him his sister was playing the piano in the music room. No other sound reached him and no one was in sight. Forrester closed the laundry door softly and stole across the lawn to the road.

CHAPTER XIX—FACE TO FACE

It was bright moonlight when Forrester left the house and walked south on Sheridan Road. He had decided to walk to Lucy's, believing that he would attract less attention, both on the way and after reaching his destination, than if he used his roadster. Though wayside trees cast great shadows across the road, and the gloom near bordering hedgerows, or the underbrush of vacant tracts, afforded partial concealment, Forrester looked with apprehension upon the brilliancy of the night. Fortunately for his plans, large clouds began shortly to drift over the moon. The gloom was more intense during these moments of darkness because of the transition from periods of strong moonlight.

The night was unusually still, undoubtedly because of an approaching storm, and few people seemed to be abroad. Only two motor cars passed him during the journey between his home and Jasper lane. One of these passed at a time when the moon was shining brightly and Forrester was sure that it was Melville's limousine. At the moment, he was walking in the deep shadow of a high hedge and was probably invisible to the occupants of the car. It was a providential circumstance, for to be stopped and questioned at this time would not only cause delay, but might attract undesirable attention.

Reaching Jasper lane, Forrester kept to the grass at the side, and walking slowly, succeeded in approaching the oak tree without any sound that would be audible to others than himself. He paused, listening long and intently. The silence seemed almost palpable, its noiseless fingers clutching at him from the darkness. A momentary flash of the moon gave him his bearings. During the succeeding darkness, Forrester, stooping low, carefully felt his way past the tree and down the path toward Lucy's cottage. Unless the colored woman had secured another dog, Forrester was sure that he could reach her door unnoticed. It was then his

purpose to tie her fast and either frighten her into some helpful admission or else discover for himself some clue possibly overlooked by the police.

The cottage stood dark and silent in its little clearing. Forrester reached it without hearing a sound, but he had a momentary feeling of uneasiness when the moon shone full upon him as he crossed the clearing. At the door he paused to consider. Was the woman away? Or had she retired for the night? If the latter, then he would probably be able to surprise her while she slept. Forrester placed his hand on the doorknob and turned it slowly and quietly. Then he exerted a gentle pressure, and was gratified, though astonished, to find that the door opened. Fearful of squeaking hinges Forrester moved the door inward an inch at a time, and entering, closed it in the same careful way. There was no key in the lock, but running his hand along the edge of the door, Forrester discovered a bolt which he softly pushed into place.

Forrester took out the muffler and wound it about his neck and face until only his eyes were exposed. Then he pulled his cap down so that its vizor shadowed even these. With intermittent and cautious flashes of his pocket lamp he found that the room was unoccupied and the door leading to what he believed to be Lucy's bedroom closed. This he approached with wary tread and opened the door slowly and softly. A flash of his light showed that the bedroom was also deserted. Lucy was not at home! It was a wonderful opportunity that might be interrupted at any moment, so Forrester worked fast. He considered it immaterial what the woman might discover after he was gone. Any disorder she would probably attribute to another visit by the police.

Forrester tore the coverings from the bed and scattered the contents of drawers on the floor. His search was unrewarded. There was not a line of writing anywhere; no concealed arms, Bolshevik literature or suspicious bottles; absolutely nothing to form the slightest clue. He then carried his search into the sitting room with equally unsuccessful results. Forrester received an uncomfortable shock as he turned his pocket lamp into the aquarium and saw the slimy bodies of the snakes writhe uneasily under the glare of the light.

Thus far the search had been fruitless and discouraging, but the sight of the snakes in their glass prison started Forrester's mind to working. What was the real purpose of these snakes? Their uncanny, loathsome bodies were repellent to the strongest man. *Repellent!* The word was illuminative. Was not one of its definitions "drive back"? Was this the actual purpose of the snakes?

Forrester fixed the button on his pocket lamp to keep the light steady, and laid it on the center table to illumine his work. Lifting the stand on which the aquarium rested he placed it near the middle of the room and pulled aside the

heavy rug.

Directly beneath the spot where the aquarium stood was a square trapdoor in the floor!

Forrester stooped, placed two fingers in a hole, evidently provided for the purpose, lifted the section of carefully fitted flooring and set it to one side. Taking his light from the table and turning its rays into the opening Forrester saw a ladder leading into a cellar beneath the cottage. Swiftly he dropped his legs through the hole and descended.

The underground room in which he found himself was smaller than the space covered by the cottage. The walls were of large rough stones, showing evidence of dampness. Along these walls was piled litter of a varied nature—old barrels, boxes, empty food tins and the broken remains of furniture. Against the front wall, at a point almost under the entrance door, stood an old, dilapidated sideboard. It attracted Forrester's attention because he could not conceive how such a large object had been brought into the cellar through the small trap. It was the only thing in the cellar that could be readily moved, and Forrester had an inspiration to look behind it. At the first effort the sideboard swung out from the wall on smooth-running casters that strangely had apparently not been affected by the dampness of the cellar.

Moving the sideboard disclosed a small, rough-board door in the wall. This Forrester opened and flashed his light into the space beyond. It seemed to be a narrow passage, the floor a little below the level of the cellar. Forrester dropped into the passage and started along it, throwing his light about him and studying its formation. The floor was sandy, the walls of solid rock, and the roof appeared to have been formed by a multitude of interlacing tree and plant roots. The average width of the passage was about five feet and its height somewhere between ten and twelve. Forrester's trained eye saw instantly that it was the work of Nature, not of man. At some remote period a cleft had been riven in the solid rock and the intertwined roots above prevented the caving in of the surface soil.

A momentary sparkle on the ceiling caught Forrester's eye. He then discovered that electric lights were hung from the roof at regular intervals. They were beyond his reach, and as no connection or switch along the walls had been discovered, Forrester concluded that the lights could be operated only from some point inside the cottage.

Presently Forrester came to an indentation in the wall on his right, forming a sort of shelf. On this rested two bright steel cylinders about the size of the small fire extinguisher he carried in his car. To one of the cylinders was attached a five-foot length of a slender rubber tubing which connected it with one of the rubber

death masks he knew only too well. Here at last was evidence beyond dispute. Forrester did not meddle with the cylinders. The slightest mistake made by one unaccustomed to them might release the deadly gas he had reason to believe they contained. In that confined space its action would be swift and sure.

Continuing along the passage Forrester finally came to the end. At this point it widened out slightly into a small chamber. At one side a ladder led up into a mass of tangled tree roots that hung in fantastic shapes, which gave Forrester an uncomfortable feeling that he had stumbled into a veritable den of snakes. Forcing back this feeling of revulsion he climbed the ladder.

Here the handiwork of man was in evidence. He was ascending into a space that had been hollowed out of the heart of a tree. Above his head was a small wooden trapdoor held in place by a wood slide or bolt. Releasing the bolt allowed the door to drop silently downward on hinges formed of stiff leather. A package fell into his hands, followed by a draft of air laden with the scent of summer woods. Pushing up his light Forrester recognized the hollow in the oak tree. He saw also that the upper side of the trapdoor was so prepared that it would seem like part of the tree to anyone investigating from above.

At last the most vital secret of the "Friends of the Poor" was in his hands—the method by which they had so mysteriously secured their toll under the very eyes of the detectives.

Forrester examined the small, flat package in his hand. Someone had placed a contribution in the tree that night. Then Forrester shivered. The scoundrels would come to collect at any moment! He was shut in at the far end of a narrow passage, the only way of escape leading back through the cottage where they would enter. If they met him here his end would be sure and his disappearance a mystery forever. Hastily he climbed down the ladder and was about to go when several objects drew his attention. The temptation to investigate these before he left was too strong to resist and Forrester lingered a moment or two longer.

All the paraphernalia that had made possible the ghostly illusions, which had frightened others and puzzled him, now lay revealed as nothing but mean claptrap. On the wall hung a group of rusty chains, a small megaphone for throwing the voice and an old locomotive bell. In one corner stood a tin similar to a paint can. This, Forrester found, contained a preparation commonly known as phosphorescent paint and a nearby glove, which smelled strongly of the substance, solved the riddle of the flaming hand which had impressed even the phlegmatic Green. The greatest curiosity of all, however, was a black tube standing against the wall. Forrester instantly remembered the appearance of something of this kind in Humphrey's photograph. On examination it proved to be a homemade

periscope. By pushing it up into the opening in the oak tree it was probably possible for a person in the cave to ascertain what was occurring on the surface. Forrester did not wait to experiment, for he was sure that on the night of the Italians' visit someone was taking in the scene and the projecting end of the periscope had been picked up by the camera.

Forrester now hurried down the passage. Unquestionably he had lingered longer than was wise, and a quick escape was imperative. As he passed back through the passage Forrester's engineering training caused him to note certain things about him. Though the rocky walls and the sand beneath his feet were now dry, he saw indications that the cleft must serve as a drain for the neighborhood. In the winter it was probably a well; full of cold, stagnant water, which, he surmised, accounted for the peculiar inactivity of the "Friends of the Poor" after the winter rains and snow fell.

Before he reached the end of the passage Forrester was startled to hear a grating sound, followed by a slight thud.

Like a flash the truth came to him. Someone had discovered the moved sideboard and open door and surmising that the visitor was still in the cave had shut him in.

Forrester paused to reflect. It would be useless to try and force his way out. Even if he could get through the door, which he doubted, there was no telling how many of the band were in the cottage. Forrester was unarmed, as he had expected to deal only with Lucy, and a battle with more than one man would be an unequal struggle. To make matters worse, his electric lamp, which had been in constant use since he entered the cottage, now gave out. The bulb still glowed, but with a dull light that had no power. Forrester flung the lamp down and felt his way back toward the tree. He reasoned that as a package had been placed in the tree it was more than probable that detectives were concealed nearby. To climb into the opening in the tree, attract their attention by shouting, and then give directions for reaching him, seemed the only solution.

Continued calls, however, brought no response. Either there were no detectives there, or else his cries for help, which necessarily had to be subdued, were acting on superstitious minds and accomplishing just the opposite of what he intended—driving help away. Forrester ceased his calls and climbed slowly down into the cave once more.

Suddenly the place was brilliantly illuminated by the turning on of the electric lights over his head. The meaning of this was clear. The time had come when he must fight for his life and Forrester looked about for a weapon. There was nothing that would serve his purpose. Then he recollected the cylinders. Who

knew better than these men their death-dealing power? With these cylinders in his hands would it not be possible to hold his assailants at bay—even to overcome them? Forrester dashed down the passage to reach the cylinders before his enemies. It was too late! As he rounded a slight curve in the rocky cleft he saw the figure of a man only a short distance away. Still there might be time. He could see the depression where the cylinders rested and the man was some distance on the other side. Forrester kept on, but his hopes fell as he saw the man reach the spot first and stop.

Forrester also came to a halt and the two men surveyed each other in silence. Completely covering the man's head and shoulders was a black hood. Through two slits Forrester could see the sparkle of his eyes. Forrester recalled Prentice's description of the two hooded men who had attacked him and realized that at last he was face to face with the "Friends of the Poor."

The man moved forward. As he approached, his body slightly crouched like a wrestler waiting for his opening, Forrester took heart. If it was simply to be a hand to hand contest and the men came only one at a time, then there was some hope.

Forrester kept the man off at first with his fists, but at length they closed and a desperate struggle began. Back and forth they tugged and pulled, neither man seemingly gaining any advantage. All at once Forrester saw the cylinders at his side and suddenly realized that throughout the struggle the man had been slowly dragging him along toward these death machines. And with the realization he saw the man reach out and seize the one with the rubber mask attached.

From that moment the battle changed. Forrester's one thought was to keep the mask away from his face, while the man's main effort was evidently directed toward placing it there. Presently Forrester detected the peculiar odor of the gas. Either the cylinder had been accidentally opened in the struggle or the man had intentionally released the gas. As the mask was directed toward Forrester, and only a few inches from his face, he received the full effect of the fumes, while the man was partially protected from its effect. Forrester felt himself weakening, as he had on the night of the battle in Jasper lane.

With a last despairing effort he tripped his antagonist and as they fell Forrester managed to come down on top. Slowly he forced the mask over the man's hooded face and just as he had it in place Forrester sank down unconscious.

CHAPTER XX—THE INVISIBLE DETECTIVE

Forrester awoke to find himself in the same bedroom in which he had recovered consciousness after the attack made upon him in Jasper lane. The recognition of his surroundings was a shocking stimulant. Like a flash the whole scene in the underground passage was recalled.

That he should again have been rescued by the girl possessed a significance which permitted of no alleviating doubt. Mary Sturtevant was unquestionably hand and glove with the "Friends of the Poor." Forrester closed his eyes and groaned. He loved her—would have redeemed her from their clutches—but she had not listened to him. *Now the whole terrible secret was within his grasp and yet that love for her must hold him back!*

How could he expose the "Friends of the Poor" and drag her down in the crash? Bolshevik they *might* be—murderers they surely were. Public opinion, aroused now to fever heat, would see that not one escaped the full penalty. Unless the girl were part and parcel with the organization and knew their inmost secrets—their every move—she would never have been close at hand to save him from that hidden passage where no one knew that he had gone.

Suddenly he felt a cool, soft hand upon his forehead. He opened his eyes and turned his head. Mary Sturtevant sat by the bedside, gazing down at him with bright eyes as she gently stroked his head.

"Mary," he whispered, reproachfully, "I can't believe it!"

"Oh, Robert," she exclaimed, "are you feeling all right again? I have been so worried. It is two days since we brought you here. Each time you awoke you were delirious and we had to give you sleeping powders to keep you quiet."

Then she seized his hands in her own and held them close to her. "Robert," she murmured, "now that it is all over, I can answer you. *I love you!*"

He drew her hands back to him and pressed them to his lips. "All over?" he queried, at last. "What do you mean?"

"I know it is against the doctor's orders to excite you," she answered, "but I cannot stand this dreadful suspense any longer. There is a man waiting downstairs who can explain all. I have made him stay close at hand every day so that when your mind became clear you could know the whole story immediately. I will bring him up now," and Mary Sturtevant withdrew her hands from Forrester's clasp and ran out of the room.

In a few minutes she returned, followed by a tall, broad-shouldered man, with kindly brown eyes and streaks of gray in his thick, dark hair. He smiled down reassuringly at Forrester as the girl introduced him.

"This," she announced, happily, "is Mr. Keith Marten, whom I call the invisible detective."

Marten took Forrester's hand and held it for a moment with a warm, friendly clasp, as he said, "I am very glad to meet you face to face, Mr. Forrester. I have known you well for weeks, but chiefly from some distance. As Miss Sturtevant says, I have endeavored to remain invisible."

Marten then drew a chair near the bed and sat down.

"Do either of you mind my smoking?" he asked, taking a cigar from his pocket. "Tobacco is my principal failing—one, however, which I believe I share in common with all who must draw deeply upon nervous force in their work."

Both urged him to smoke, and while Marten lighted his cigar, Mary Sturtevant explained his connection with the case to Forrester.

"Mr. Marten was in the Government Secret Service for many years, and has had his own investigative service for some time.

"You probably noticed that the majority of the men victimized by this supposed band of extortioners were prominent in banking circles. That constituted a direct assault upon the banking fraternity. While people outside of banking circles did not know of it, this persecution was gradually bringing on an actual financial panic. When it was rumored that a banker had given up a large sum to this supposed society, or his murder was reported, a mild run resulted at the bank with which he was associated. If there had been only one or two cases this would have had little effect, but as numerous banks were brought into the matter there was a tendency to spread this fear and the germs of a panic were insidiously gripping financial circles. The matter was finally taken up at a special conference of the *Midland Bankers' Association.*

"Shortly before you were selected as a victim, the M. B. A. engaged Mr. Marten to solve the riddle of the 'Friends of the Poor,' and the secret toll which

they were imposing upon bankers. Mr. Marten has been the invisible detective, working behind the scenes in this case. Just how he accomplished his great work I shall leave to Mr. Marten to tell you."

"Your story will certainly interest me," declared Forrester, smiling at Marten, and elated at the thought that Mary Sturtevant had been working in a good cause. "I had about lost faith in the supposed abilities of detectives."

"There are many able detectives," replied Marten. "You made your first mistake in not going to a high-class detective agency. You cannot judge the ability of all detectives by ex-policemen like Green, or by the average city men. To become a city detective, a man must put in long service as a policeman; and even then he has no guarantee that he will ever be promoted to the detective section. The peculiar type of brain, the scientific turn of mind, and the education which make an efficient detective, naturally render long preliminary service as a policeman abhorrent to the men who make the best detectives. Moreover, the physical requirements of the police department shut out many brilliant thinkers. Consequently, the best detective material seldom, if ever, reaches city police departments.

"The whole principle is wrong, and until some other system is established we will continue to see fine specimens of physical development, whose very appearance advertises their calling, trying to solve intricate criminal cases by muscle-power instead of brain-power. It is analogous to placing a prize fighter in the chair of higher mathematics at some university.

"Forgive me, Mr. Forrester, if I bore you with these extraneous comments, but it is a subject that takes up much of my leisure time. I hope, by educating influential men like you, that the system will be changed; that eventually we will have a great central department like Scotland Yard, or that the detective bureaus of large cities will be separate from the regular police departments."

"You do not bore me, Mr. Marten," returned Forrester. "On the contrary, I am deeply interested; especially because of what happened in the present case."

"Well, enough of that," said Marten. "Now for the story I came here to tell.

"Unlike police detectives, I do not immediately ascribe a crime to the lower criminal classes. I *know* that criminal tendencies extend upward through every stratum of society. My first effort, therefore, is to place the possible social standing of the criminal, and thus learn approximately *where* to look for him.

"In the present instance I took all the available data and analyzed the situation. Two points impressed me at once. One, that for approximately a year not a single clue had been discovered. Second, the enormous amount of money which had been extorted. This had reached the sum of nearly a quarter of a million dollars."

"I considered those points," said Forrester, "but they gave me no clue."

"Ah, because you lacked two things," returned Marten. "Experience and the outside viewpoint. Now, in analyzing the first point, I seriously doubted the existence of a *group* of men as implied by the name 'Friends of the Poor.' When a gang is operating it is difficult to hold the men together. Something slips sooner or later, just as in the case of those West Side Italians who were caught by the police. I became convinced that we had to deal *with one man only*. I was even more convinced of this when I considered the amount of money involved. To have attempted to split so vast an amount in an equitable way among a number of ordinary criminals would eventually have led to dissensions and exposure.

"Then, in considering this second point by itself, I saw that we had to deal with no ordinary criminal. It was a vast sum, and the ordinary criminal type does not think in such large figures. The result of this analysis gave me two clues: first, that we probably had to deal with not more than one man; and second, that this man was a much higher type than the common malefactor.

"Another point to consider was the manner of death of those victims who failed to make their payments. These men were all asphyxiated. I did not know the exact method at the time, as I know it now, but the principle remained the same. To accomplish this asphyxiation, I reasoned that the victim must be lured to some place for the purpose. If only one man were engaged in the work, it was obvious that he was not only acquainted with the victims' habits, but probably sufficiently well acquainted with the victims themselves to possess their confidence. All this pointed to a man of high social position.

"My next step, therefore, was to make a list of the victims and all their business and social acquaintances. I then compared these lists to ascertain the men known in common to all, or the majority of the victims. In this way I discovered a certain number of men known to all the victims. The lives and habits of these men were investigated in search of a possible clue. No definite results. Finally, pondering over the case one day, the initials of one man impressed themselves upon me. His initials were F. P.—the same initials that would stand for 'Friends of the Poor.' Such a clue might seem fantastic. In criminal investigation, however, clues are often the result of inspiration, and I could not afford to let this coincidence pass. I made a more thorough investigation into the history and actions of Frederick Prentice."

"Frederick Prentice!" gasped Forrester, starting up in bed.

"Exactly," returned Marten, "the supposed first victim."

"Our families have been friends for years," groaned Forrester. "His daughter, Diana, and myself were childhood companions. How could he attempt *my* life?"

"The man was mentally unsound," explained Marten. "The successful operation of his scheme excited his weakening brain until it became an obsession with him. Although he had achieved his original purpose of recuperating his broken fortunes, I believe he continued his threats and killing for the sheer insane joy of playing with his victim and then killing him. Possibly, the attendant mystery and notoriety also appealed to some perverted side of his nature."

"Go on with your story," said Forrester.

"These were the facts which I discovered about Prentice," continued Marten. "His mother died years ago in a private sanitarium for the insane on Long Island, New York. This showed a possibility that Prentice's mind might be affected, and in its weakness assume a criminal trend. I found that Prentice's father had willed him a certain amount of money, and that Prentice had lost approximately this amount in the stock market. That showed a possible reason for his step, for Prentice had a rather expensive wife and daughter to maintain, and he knew absolutely nothing of business. Prentice's father also willed him the piece of property upon which the oak tree stands. A few weeks before the affair started, Prentice ostensibly sold this property to a man named Hans Eckmeier, who in turn quickly sold it to a colored woman who lived in a small cottage on the property—a woman, by the way, without visible means of support, and without any financial resources which could be located. This unquestionably indicated preliminary preparation designed to eliminate any connection of Prentice with the property. There were rumors, too, that this woman had murdered her husband. Rumors are hardly to be considered as evidence, yet this story offered a possible basis for Prentice having a hold over the negress.

"Further investigation revealed the fact that Hans Eckmeier had received considerable financial assistance at different periods from Prentice, and was under obligation to him. Moreover, this man, who was a chemist, had invented a deadly poison gas, the formula of which he sold to the German Government just previous to the war. Here, Mr. Forrester, were a remarkable series of clues.

"If we could back these with a few pieces of actual evidence, our case was closed. That was the problem; how to get the evidence. I dared not appear in the case myself, nor have ordinary detectives come into contact with Prentice, without the danger of arousing his suspicions; yet it was imperative that someone possessing investigative instincts should come into close association with this man.

"During the war, while I was engaged in secret service work in New York, Miss Sturtevant, like many other women of her station in life, was of great assistance to the Government. Because of her social position it was possible for her

to take her place in Prentice's social set without arousing any suspicion as to her purpose. It was arranged through the M.B.A. for her to rent the Bradbury house for the summer. This house was located sufficiently near the tree for her to watch it, and also within easy reach of Prentice's home. The M.B.A. arranged for Miss Sturtevant to receive letters of introduction to Chicago people who would be most helpful to her. The stage was completely set for our work just about the time you received your notice, and we hoped, through Prentice's attack upon you, to get the definite evidence we desired. That explains, for example, the telephone calls you received. I attempted to find out about the time you would place the money in the tree so as to make proper arrangements. When you refused the information Miss Sturtevant obtained it for me. We expected Prentice to go to the tree, and Miss Sturtevant was placed in a very fortunate position to watch him that night by being invited to a dinner and dance at his home; his family, of course, being entirely ignorant of his schemes. I received a report from her on Prentice's lawn, shortly after you left, and hurried to the tree. I was standing only a short distance back of the tree during the whole affair.

"You are familiar with the fiasco which the city detectives brought about that night. The package mysteriously disappeared, and as I learned later through Miss Sturtevant that Prentice left the dance for approximately three-quarters of an hour, he undoubtedly secured it. We were absolutely sure then that Prentice was the chief conspirator, probably being assisted by the chemist and the negress, Lucy. But we had no actual evidence.

"Our next opportunity was furnished by the Melville incident."

"Tell me one thing," interrupted Forrester. "What was Mary's connection with that affair?"

"I can explain that, Robert," replied the girl. "I knew that Mr. Melville was in danger when I saw Prentice there. After going to the conservatory with his son, it suddenly occurred to me that I might find some evidence in Prentice's car—particularly as I now knew about the gas and the mask through your adventure. Knowing that my next dances were with you, I felt that no special attention would be drawn to my absence, so I excused myself and slipped out. In the compartment under the front seat of Prentice's car I found one of the gas cylinders with the mask attached. Hoping to avert another murder I tried to stuff my handkerchief into the tube. The handkerchief was too large, so I tore it in half and then succeeded."

"And," completed Marten, "the gas being forced into the cylinder under pressure, it naturally blew out the handkerchief when released; a mechanical condition which did not occur to Miss Sturtevant. Your curious suspicions of Miss

Sturtevant, by the way, made it very hard for her at times. We dared not let you into the secret, because a hot-headed young man like you might have upset our carefully laid plans. It should be unnecessary now for us to explain in detail the various little incidents which aroused your suspicions of her. With your present knowledge of the case you can easily understand the underlying cause in each instance.

"Incidentally, Mr. Forrester," added Marten, soothingly, "I want to compliment you upon some of your amateur detective work. You frequently showed fine detective instincts, and it was entirely due to you that we discovered how the money was obtained from the tree. Without your visit to the cottage, that point at least might have remained a mystery."

"But you have not told me how the case finally worked out, Mr. Marten," reminded Forrester.

"I was coming to that," returned Marten. "We had definitely decided that the money was obtained from the tree in some way through the agency of Lucy. It was arranged with Melville to make a pretense of putting money in the tree. Miss Sturtevant managed to convey the information to Prentice that Melville would do this on a certain night—the night of your visit, to be exact.

"Then, instead of watching the tree, as all had done before, *we watched the woman's cottage*. At the time you entered, the cottage was surrounded by my men and Miss Sturtevant and I were close at hand. You may be sure you gave us a shock, but we planned to let all who wished to do so, enter the cottage, but none would be allowed to leave. You were the first. Later, Lucy appeared, and it is assumed that she discovered you in the cave. When Prentice arrived, Lucy warned him, and between them they hastily prepared the hood with which he disguised himself. Yes," added Marten, noting Forrester's astounded expression, "that was Prentice with whom you fought. We entered the passage just as you conquered him."

"And you have captured them all!" exclaimed Forrester.

"On the contrary," replied Marten, "they are all dead—but the case is solved."

"Dead!" repeated Forrester.

"Yes," said Marten. "You killed Prentice with his own gas. Lucy escaped and went to warn the chemist. He, probably realizing that escape was impossible, killed both Lucy and himself with the gas. We found their bodies when we went to his place. The most intricate case of my career, therefore, has been satisfactorily solved and a terrible menace removed."

"And Prentice's family," murmured Forrester. "What about them?"

"Mrs. Prentice turned everything over to the M.B.A. She had a small private

income, however, which the association refused to touch. She and her daughter, Diana, left this morning to go to Europe, where they will remain indefinitely.

"Now," terminated Marten, rising, "I am sure that I have cleared Miss Sturtevant of any suspicion in your eyes, and I will leave you two together to solve any further problems you may have in your own way."

Marten shook hands with Forrester and Mary Sturtevant and left the room. A minute later they heard the thrumming of the engine as he drove away in his car.

THE END

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SECRET TOLL ***

A Word from Project Gutenberg

We will update this book if we find any errors.

This book can be found under: http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/37378

Creating the works from public domain print editions means that no one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works to protect the Project Gutenberg™ concept and trademark. Project Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for the eBooks, unless you receive specific permission. If you do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the rules is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and research. They may be modified and printed and given away – you may do practically *anything* with public domain eBooks. Redistribution is subject to the trademark license, especially commercial redistribution.

The Full Project Gutenberg License

Please read this before you distribute or use this work.

To protect the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase "Project Gutenberg"), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg™ License available with this file or online at http://www.gutenberg.org/license.

Section 1. General Terms of Use & Redistributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg™ electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. "Project Gutenberg" is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg™ electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg™ electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation ("the Foundation" or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is in the public domain in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg™ works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg™ name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg™ License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work

or any other Project Gutenberg™ work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country outside the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase "Project Gutenberg" appears, or with which the phrase "Project Gutenberg" is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

> This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at http://www.gutenberg.org

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from the public domain (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase "Project Gutenberg" associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies

of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ web site (http://www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, "Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation."

- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.

- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.

- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement,

you must obtain permission in writing from both the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and Michael Hart, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3. below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread public domain works in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain "Defects," such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES – Except for the "Right of Replacement or Refund" described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND – If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you 'AS-IS,' WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIM-

ITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTIBILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY – You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need, is critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™'s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation web page at http://www.pglaf.org .

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN

or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Its 501(c)(3) letter is posted at http://www.gutenberg.org/fundraising/pglaf . Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's principal office is located at 4557 Melan Dr. S. Fairbanks, AK, 99712., but its volunteers and employees are scattered throughout numerous locations. Its business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887, email business@pglaf.org. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's web site and official page at http://www.pglaf.org

For additional contact information:

> Dr. Gregory B. Newby
> Chief Executive and Director
> gbnewby@pglaf.org

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without wide spread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit http://www.gutenberg.org/fundraising/donate

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg Web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: http://www.gutenberg.org/fundraising/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works.

Professor Michael S. Hart is the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For thirty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as Public Domain in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Each eBook is in a subdirectory of the same number as the eBook's eBook number, often in several formats including plain vanilla ASCII, compressed (zipped), HTML and others.

Corrected *editions* of our eBooks replace the old file and take over the old filename and etext number. The replaced older file is renamed. *Versions* based on separate sources are treated as new eBooks receiving new filenames and etext numbers.

Most people start at our Web site which has the main PG search facility:

http://www.gutenberg.org

This Web site includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.